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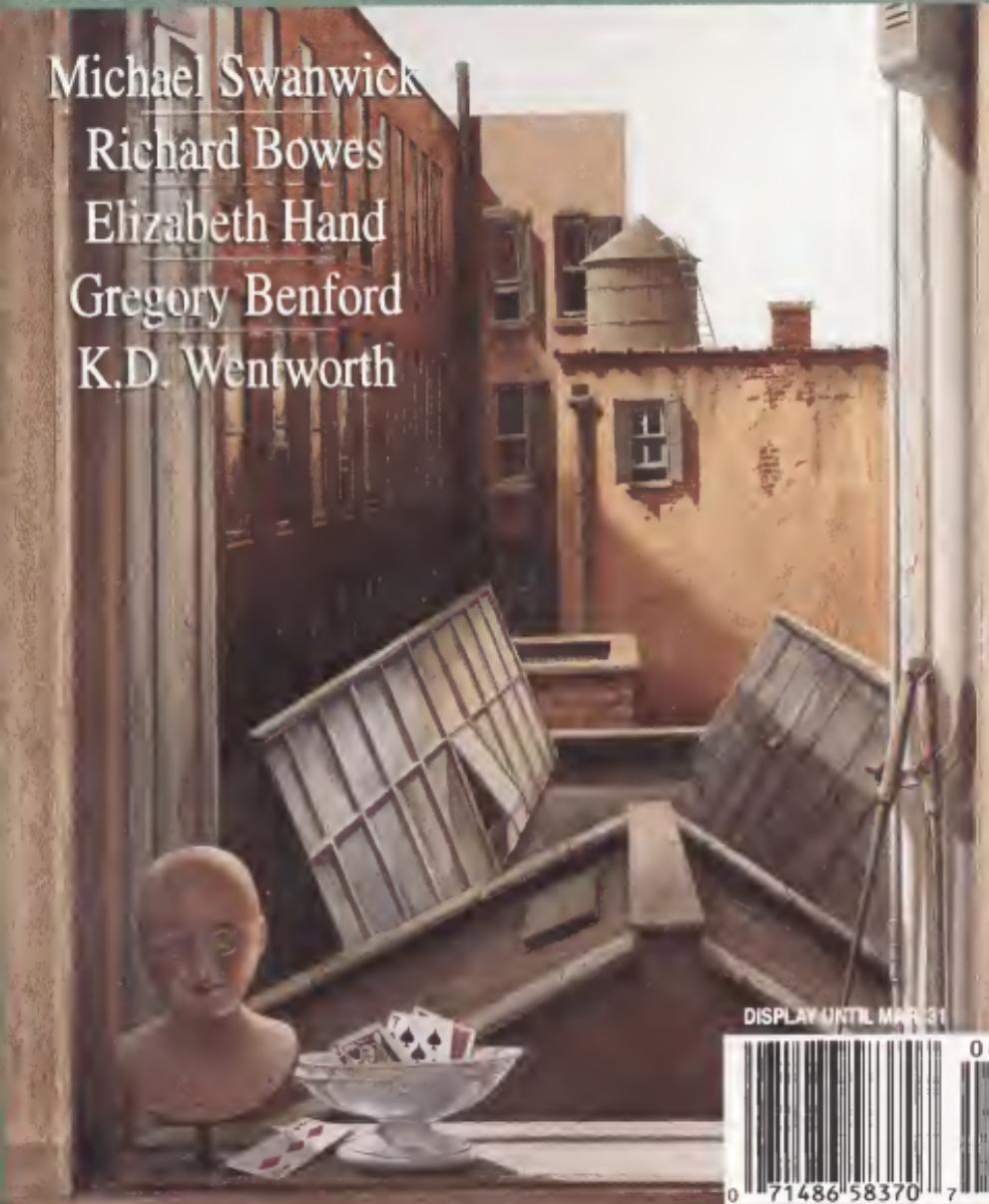
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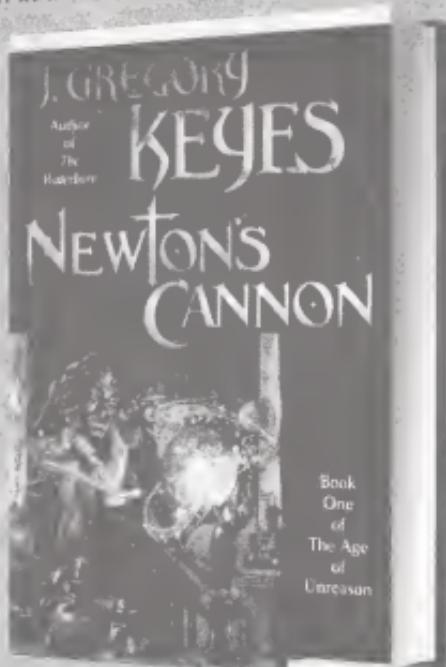
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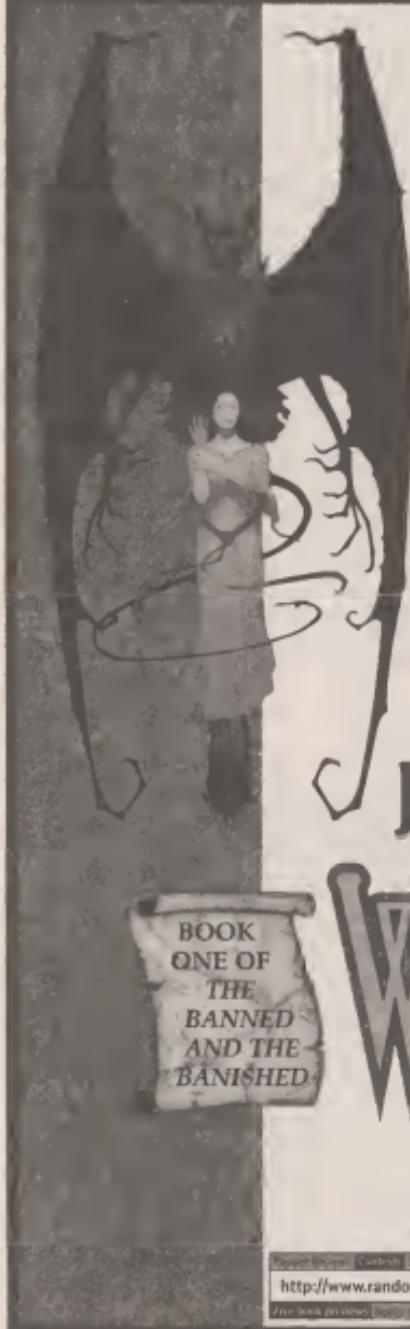


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COVER BY WILLIAM WARD BEECHER FOR "SO MANY MILES TO THE HEART OF A CHILD."

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*Last year we published "Streetcar Dreams," which we thought would be Rick Bowes's final Kevin Grierson story to appear before the tales were assembled into book form. Well, here at F&SF (much like in Grierson's life), things don't always go according to plan. *Minions of the Moon*, the novel formed from such memorable tales as "At Darlington's" and "On Death and the Deuce," is due to hit the bookstore shelves in about six months. In the meantime, let's hop on the merry-go-round of Kevin Grierson's life one last time and see if that brass ring is in reach...*

So Many Miles to the Heart of a Child

By Richard Bowes

1.

NEW YORK CITY TWENTY years ago was a merry-go-round. Everyone felt that as we spun through the nights and days.

On a certain night in those carousel years of the late seventies, I awoke from a dream of light and motion, looked down at George Halle with his head resting on my groin and knew we were being watched. Naturally, I first thought it was my Shadow.

My name is Kevin Grierson, and I've been stalked by my doppelgänger for as long as I can remember. At the point of my waking up that night, I'd been clean and sober for a few years. A wise man had taught me to recognize my double as the embodiment of my addictions, of my will to self destruction. Since then my Shadow and I had kept our distance.

In my roaring days, I would awaken strung out, hungover, to feel the cold tingle of my Shadow's contempt. Back then, he was in total control of our lives and we both knew it.

This time, the one watching felt different. If it was my Shadow, he seemed somehow hesitant, almost scared by what he saw.

When I woke up all the way and looked around, though, the only one in the room with me was George, fuzzy and compact, a businesslike medium-sized bear. My legs entwined with his, my hand against his dark shoulder looked pale. I watched him sleep in the slatted light from the street and marveled that my peaceful companion had a full round soul when I had only a sliver of one.

Despite all my wonder and worship, though, George and I were long past those moments when my spine felt like an arrow shot at the sun or anywhere near it. In bed, I paid him back with sex for the pleasure and generosity of his company. But with each passing season the occasions grew more frequent when I awoke feeling empty and alien.

That night, a cry came from the next room. Not the voice of a small child, but not that of an adult either. George stirred and I knew that, if he heard it again, he'd be awake and concerned.

Remembering to put on a robe, I went to look. For privacy George had arranged screens at one end of the living room. Behind them, on the couch, tangled in a sheet, skinny, long-haired, was Scott Callendar, fourteen. He lay facedown in a pair of the beloved surfer jams we hoped he took off in the shower but weren't sure.

Blanche, George's elegant and reserved Siamese dowager, curled above Scott's head. Since the kid had arrived for a barely announced visit two weeks before, the cat had attached herself to him like a familiar.

As I stood over him, Scott, still asleep, twisted his head like he was shaking away a dream. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a spark like a firefly. Blanche's eyes narrowed as she scanned the dark corners, tail twitching. She watched through slits as I adjusted the sheet over the kid.

Scott moaned, his muscles rigid. My own father was dead before I knew him. And seeing the kid like this, I felt, with heart in throat, that his life was in my hands. Carefully supervised by Blanche, I stroked his neck and whispered, "Just a nightmare," until I felt him relax. When I looked around, there was no trace of the fiery spark.

Years before, back at college, I had awakened to feel my Shadow watching me. That night, I lay next to a girl my age named Sarah Bryce. Time spun on. A guy named Scott Callendar appeared on the scene and

married Sarah. Scotty himself showed up a year or so after that. He amazed me from the moment he was born.

Scott Junior and I had in common dark legacies. Scott's father lived on speed and violence. He died in a fiery motorcycle crash and I can't say I was blameless in that. But I can't say he was entirely gone either. He left behind a little family memento, a book called *A Garland Knot for Children*.

Those times that Scotty needed help, I did my best for him. When Sarah Callendar remarried, George and I attended the wedding. The new husband, unlike the first, was not at all the kind of guy who was inclined to set the kid on fire for kicks or fly to eternity on a flaming motorcycle. The three of them moved to the South Shore of Long Island.

As unofficial godfather, I sent him birthday and Christmas presents: toys at first, then checks. I saw him rarely enough to be shocked each time at how tall he had gotten. And I waited.

The call came one morning. Scotty's voice was half changed. Sounding desperate and choked, like he was afraid someone might overhear, he asked if he could visit. Before clearing it with his mother, I asked George who, bless him, said yes without hesitation.

His mother told me, "Getting rid of him for a couple of weeks just might keep me sane. If he gets to be too much, is that military school they sent you to still in business?"

Too old for camp, too tough for the Hamptons, was my take when Scott showed up. He brought a skateboard and a duffle bag that seemed to be stuffed entirely with T-shirts. But he didn't bring *A Garland Knot for Children*. Believe me, I checked.

Scotty was a little reserved around me. And I guess I wasn't fully prepared to deal with a haunted fourteen-year-old. But George immediately hired the kid for two dollars an hour and put him to work preparing for our big Disney sale. George and I had opened HALF REMEMBERED THINGS, selling antique toys, a little over a year before. Scott followed my partner like a puppy. Children would have saved our marriage, I understand now.

When I crawled back into bed after checking on Scott that night, George, still asleep, asked, "'S all right?" I whispered yes.

Even if he had been awake, what was I going to say? "Georgie, the



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kid's haunted. His late father is this kind of flaming match-head. But his son can summon him through this enchanted book. Scott Callendar Sr. has it in for me, by the way. Just because he knows I contributed to his death. Some ghosts will never learn to lie down."

No, the beauty of George, like Sarah long before him, was his being so warmly mundane. That was enough to make me snuggle up against him in the air-conditioned chill.

Not enough to keep me faithful, or even nice to him, of course. The romance dribbled out of our relationship and our partnership almost sank in ethical differences. In those years, I grew and trimmed a beard just like a hundred thousand other guys my age. We were all timeless, interchangeable, smooth as glass.

The next morning, or one shortly thereafter, I spent at the store unpacking Donald Duck toothbrushes and coloring books. Our Disneyana Sale was make or break for us. George and Scotty were doing a window arrangement, stringing an inflatable Dumbo so that it flew above a Mickey Mouse plate like the cow sailing over the moon.

For our partnership in *HALF REMEMBERED THINGS*, I contributed big chunks of my time and followed outside leads. George, who put up our initial investment, handled display and promotion.

For our Disney sale, an old Italian woman in the neighborhood had told me, dribbling it out slowly, warily, that her brother had "Mickey Mouse toys." And that he lived in New Jersey. And finally that he wanted to see what I thought they were worth.

So, I spent a mind-boggling afternoon in a Hoboken cellar up to my nuts in wind-up Goofies, Minnie Mouse coloring books, a streetcar with Pluto driving and Huey, Dewey and Louie, Mort and Ferd aboard. Enough stuff to stock a small store. Like ours.

The guy who owned this looked like the animated version of Gepetto. So much so that I thought my nose was going to start growing when I told him, "Twenty-five hundred is as far as I can go. I don't know if anyone wants to buy this stuff."

Partly this was true. That was all the capital we had available. And I didn't know what this was worth. No one did. These kinds of toys were just starting to be widely collected. But my bet right from the first was that this could do it for us.

George, who could get a little self-righteous and anal about stuff like proper ownership and taxes, saw what I did and much more. He handed over the money and we grabbed the merchandise.

The pricing was all guesswork. George's book *Discovering the American Toy* got its start when he catalogued our purchase. Word started to get out. People started calling. *New Magazine* and *The Daily News* sent around photographers. The stories would appear after Labor Day. We spent late August getting ready.

A friend of George's gave us a two-hour tape of Disney music. It had "When You Wish Upon A Star" and "Someday My Prince Will Come," "Hey Diddley-Dee, An Actor's Life For Me," "Zippity-Doo-Dah," and all the rest. George and Scott played it constantly.

On the day that I remember, they were bringing stuff up from the cellar and singing "Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go." Maybe it was the music. More likely I was cranky because I was the one Scott had supposedly come to see but now we seemed just nodding acquaintances.

It revived my feeling that I was nothing much more than a reformed drunk, a guy who had just come in off the street. I thought that if you looked at me sideways, I wouldn't be there. "I'm going to ask that 'Hi -ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go' be played at my funeral," I told them.

They were setting up rows of dwarves made of rubber, of metal, of plastic and paper. "Let's see," said George, "We have Doc and Dopey, Happy, Grumpy.... Who's this one?"

"Sleazy," I said. "Didn't you see the bronze figure of him wearing a Mac Daddy hat?" They ignored me.

Right then the phone rang and a woman with the kind of Brooklyn accent you only hear in 1930's Hollywood comedies told me, "My name is Ellen Clark. I've asked around and heard you might be interested in something we have. It's like a toy and old. Antique." When I suggested bringing it by the store, she said, "No. It's way too big. Kind of an amusement park thing."

Then she told me what she had and I was fascinated. But I anticipated some months-long waltz like with the old Italian lady. This one, though, said, "We can drive you to see it. Today. It won't take long." The intrigue tickled me and I made an appointment for that afternoon.

Then I realized the time and was relieved at being able to slip out of

the store, saying, "I'm having lunch with Addie. We made the date last week. What do you want me to bring back?" I don't remember what George wanted. Scotty, of course, would have ordered a cheeseburger, which was all he ate that summer.

What I do remember is that George nodded and lost his smile. It seemed to me ridiculous that he was jealous of Addie and me of all things. It turned out, of course, that he was right. But not at all in the way he imagined. Not even in any way I did.

Pausing in Sheridan Square to buy hummus-and-falafel pita sandwiches and a double order of stuffed grape leaves, I watched a tour bus full of Japanese snapping pictures. Some of them focused on a hopeful but wary young man decked out in tight jeans and T-shirt embarking on Christopher Street, probably for the first time, and oblivious to their attention.

Nothing but minor dust devils stirred on drowsy, sunny Cornelia Street. I pressed a button on a wall, said, "Kevin," in response to an oracle voice asking, "Who," pushed open an iron gate as a buzzer sounded, passed down a narrow cobblestone alley, and unlatched another gate.

Then, as if I had followed a ritual prescribed by a genie, I found myself in a place of trees and ivy-covered walls, where finches chirped and a black and white cat batted at a leaf floating on a tiny marble pool. There, across a flagstone path, was a tiny, two-story house. Addie Kemper stood smiling at the worn wooden door with the quizzical owl on the brass knocker. Behind her in the office was a table with plates and a pitcher of iced tea ready.

The living space was a single huge room upstairs. The ground floor, aside from the kitchen, was Addie's office, and a blue room, its walls lined with shelves of toys: plastic Indian villages, carved wooden elephants and giraffes from East Africa, cast metal knights and ladies, tiny cardboard houses, paper dragons and silk birds, any and everything children might need to populate their fantasies and dreams.

Addie knew the weave of magic. She was a psychiatrist dealing mainly with children. Play therapy was one of her tools. We'd met at the store. And right at the start, I learned that her instinct was unerring. If a piece came into the shop that attracted me, she showed up that week and bought it. Gradually she told me why she was interested in them.

After that she would stop by and we'd talk. We stepped out for coffee

a lot. She was a good listener. The first time I had visited her house, we ended up playing on her sand table and I found I continued to do that.

On that summer afternoon a few years later, I had saved snatches of the dream that awakened me the night before. "It was lights," I told Addie, looking at her shelves. Then I spotted a small German passenger train and caught a memory. "It's too bad this isn't an electric train. The neat thing about those is that the windows light up."

Addie shook her head. "Imagination is better for our purpose."

She was right, of course. Because as soon as I placed the train on the kitchen table amid the plates, I remembered waking up the night before. "I had this dream about a train last night. It involved an old-fashioned smoker/club car, and somehow lights were spinning. I can't call the dream back, but it reminded me of something that happened when I was real small.

"When I was maybe four my mother and I lived in this apartment house in Jamaica Plain in Boston. It probably wasn't all that great. But I loved it because out the back windows you could see the old Boston, New Haven and Hartford tracks.

"One night I woke up, came out to the kitchen and found my grand aunt Tay reading the papers and drinking tea. Maybe she was taking care of me because my mother was away. Anyhow, she poured me some milk.

"As she did I looked out and saw on the tracks what seemed like a single brightly lighted railway car and got very excited. Thinking about it now, I imagine it was a club car full of people, salesmen and good-timers in that strange and distant year of 1948. The rest of the train would have been baggage cars and dark pullmans. And it must have paused for a signal on its way into Boston or through the night to Providence and New London and New Haven and New York.

"Now Tay was a woman with powers and she sometimes used them. All I can remember on that occasion was her drawing me away from the window and turning out the light saying something like 'We don't want to waste electricity.'

"What I took her to mean was that all those people in the barcar had wasted electricity. And they were condemned to a lifetime of sitting on that train and never getting home to bed."

"Sounds like a description of the West Village," Addie said and we

both laughed. But expectation hung in the air, like she had wanted the story to go further. I too began to wonder. Then we heard the voice of a child, Addie's next patient, coming through the yard, and I remembered the time and the Disney sale.

That afternoon, on my way back to the store, I caught a sidelong glance, turned to a guy, dark and skinny with a little mustache, seven or eight years younger than I but, of course, absolutely smooth and timeless. I gave him my best profile. "You could be a cop," he said, a challenge and an invitation.

Various things made that unlikely. When I spoke, though, it was in the voice of my Uncle Mike the Irish policeman. "I could." His eyes were brown. I kept my gaze riveted on them. My eyes are blue and, thus, can be quite cold. Brown-eyed people sometimes find that fascinating. "You could be a punk," I told him and he sneered. The guy handed me a slip of paper. On it was a telephone number and the generic boy's name, "Johnny."

Later that same afternoon, I was in the store with Scotty. George was away. On business, I had not the slightest doubt. We were sticking price tags on Jiminy Cricket puzzles, Bambi teapots, Donald Duck alarm clocks and a whole slew of Three Little Pig items. Three Little Pig wind-up toys and plush dolls, Three Little Pig toothbrushes and cereal bowls, flash-lights and coloring books.

"George is practical pig," Scott said, holding a Big Bad Wolf mask up to his face. I had no argument with that. "But I'm the one who builds his house out of wood."

"The hell you are! You'd be lucky to build one out of straw."

"Fuck you! I do more work than you."

Unexpectedly, that hurt. Before replying, I caught myself. "Unbelievable! I'm arguing about which of us is a harder working pig."

Scott was laughing. Sometimes there were hints of his mother about him, on occasion traces of his father. "Anyway," he said abruptly. "Thanks for inviting me. You and George."

Suddenly the conversation he had, perhaps, come to this city to have, started falling into place. "Glad to. I thought when you called and asked to stay that your old man and the book were back."

"In dreams, sometimes. A lot, actually. But mostly calling and asking

was like, you know, a test. Like the emergency door in planes. There's all these instructions about what to do in case of emergency. And I always want to test it before takeoff to make sure it works. Sometimes even after takeoff."

"Remind me never to fly with you."

"You're the only one who understands about my father and me, about the book, my whole family curse thing. My mother, I think, knows something. But she doesn't want to talk about it. With someone like my stepfather, or even George, there's no way to start in about that stuff, even if I wanted to. You had no problem with it."

This was the moment to tell him the reason why that was. "What I have is a little different. But since I was a kid younger than you, I've had this kind of double. My mother had one. And her father. The guy who got me off drugs and booze called him my *Silent Partner*...."

Scott leaned forward, hanging, for once, on what I had to say. Only then did I realize how little I knew. I paused. When the bell rang, we both jumped. The moment got shattered.

At the front door was a woman maybe fifty, dressed up as if for church in high heels and fake pearls, a kerchief and a short raincoat. She had big, serious sunglasses, as close to a mask as you can wear on the street.

"I'm Ellen Clark, the one who called you earlier," she said when I let her in. Something, the Village, Bleecker Street, me, seemed to make her nervous. "You said to come by and we could go take a look at it."

This, somehow, didn't feel right. In a city as ethnic as New York, a name as bland as Ellen Clark sounded fake. It occurred to me to apologize and tell her to come back in half an hour. By then George would have returned and could tell me whether this was or wasn't a good idea.

In the meantime I could talk to Scotty about his dad and my Shadow and what I remembered about being fourteen and an alien in the land of humankind. But, as if he had caught my own uncertainty, like quicksilver, like an autumn sky, the kid went from engaged to withdrawn. So the easiest thing was just to tell him, "Let me do this. We'll talk tomorrow before you go back." He shrugged and the opportunity went away.

The first place Ellen took me was a car, a Buick four-door, around the corner. At the wheel was a guy who could have been her husband, her boyfriend, maybe her brother. He wore a blue polo shirt and double-knit

slacks and aviator sunglasses. They exchanged nods. Uncomfortable, I found myself noting details.

His name was Walt, that much I got. The last name was blurred. She slid in back and I sat in front with Walt. Something about them made me remember an old street rule: "One trick at a time; two, almost never; three, turn and run."

Out of nowhere, I recalled myself, not much older than Scotty was at the moment, racing down a commercial street deserted on a summer evening. Behind me, a car with three guys in it backed up fast. One of them hung out the window and yelled. "Stop, little boy, if you know what's good for you!"

Then a voice in my ear, said, "They catch us, they lock us up in a cage!"

So I stretched my legs and got to the corner. Boston Common full of people strolling was across the way. The guys who had tried to pick me up seemed to flicker as they shifted out of reverse and drove off. The memory put me on edge.

When I say I'm from New York, I mean Manhattan. Walt and Ellen and I crossed the Williamsburg Bridge. Of that I was sure. But the other side of the river was unknown land. My head spun as the skyline flowed past on the left, and my sense of direction deserted me. On my right were the streets and low houses of first Brooklyn and then Queens.

"You must see a lot of strange stuff in your business," Walt said and sounded like a john trying to make conversation on a date.

"You should see the store Kevin's got," said Ellen. "All Donald Duck and Bambi. Stuff you would have tossed out not knowing it was worth anything."

We pulled off the expressway and into a neighborhood of row houses and corner stores, of kids frantic with play in the last days of vacation. Church steeples dominated the skyline. On the next block, along the East River, lay warehouses and factories, piles of lumber and steel and industrial debris. The water and the street, both almost empty of traffic, evoked the feel of a quietly decaying river town.

"Here we are," said Walt as he pulled up to the curb in front of a big, brick warehouse, old and closed. Getting out of the car, I looked down and saw tracks running along the cobblestone street. This was a streetcar line,

long unused, and I didn't know whether touching the rails or stepping over them would bring me luck.

"This is the guy to see the item," said Walt. I looked up to find that the door of the warehouse was open and the forbidden third on the date stood looking at me. "Kevin, this is Al."

He wasn't young, his eyes were hidden under the bill of a baseball cap. He wore a big cigar in his face. Still, I caught a flash of slit-eyed recognition. Over the years, I'd learned the meaning of that look. This guy had met my Shadow.

He barely nodded, but I felt his gaze on me as I was led through an office and down a hall. They slid open a big freight door and I stood at the edge of a huge loading bay. Afternoon sun filtered through cracked and dusty skylights.

The item took up most of the floor space. It was very old, but even in the dim light, it was all flashing eyes and gold skin, bared teeth, and striking hooves on horses that were halfway to being dragons.

Stunned, I stepped forward. The roof and platform of the carousel were faded red and black and yellow, all covered with mystical symbols, suns and stars and hieroglyphics.

Behind me a switch got thrown, and loading doors at the back of the bay rolled open. Outside, sunlight bounced off all the glass in Manhattan, glanced over the ripples on the river, caught the gold and ivory of the carousel. And for a moment the eyes of the horses seemed to follow mine, the muscles in their legs to shimmer.

It was set up in the middle of the floor. As I walked all the way around, I was aware of the three of them watching me from the door. Looking closely, I saw chips in the ebony hooves, hairline fractures in the ivory manes. I wondered if my Shadow had seen this thing and what he had made of it. "Does it function?" I asked.

"Not yet. We still don't have it rigged." Al spoke for the first time and sounded like phlegm or voices heard under water. "You can go up and sit on it, if you want. It's real sturdy." I shook my head. That would not be necessary. I had visions of the machinery magically activating and suddenly whirling away with me.

"Reminds me of the old-time carnies. Remember them? The side-shows? Siamese twins." He stared at me with dead eyes. His hand was on

the switch that would close the bay doors.

"You know a guy named Fred?"

Indeed I did. The name Fred was one both my Shadow and I had sometimes used.

I've always felt that it would be unfair to get killed for my doppelgänger's crimes. I had moved over toward the open doors. "I need to think a little about this," I said. The doors seemed to lurch. But two paces took me out to the loading dock and the warmth of the sun.

On the drive back over the bridge to Manhattan with Walt and Ellen, I asked about Al. "He's a business partner," said Walt. And though he said more, things became no more specific. The only point they were definite about was the price. As I got out of the car in front of the store, Walt promised to get back to me.

George asked, "What did you see?"

"Something real big," I replied. "And real old and without a scrap of paper." I told him about Ellen, Walt and Al, omitting the part about my Shadow. I described the carousel, failing to mention the rolling eyes and trembling hooves or the way it had a hook in me. "They want twenty-five grand," I said.

George shook his head. "Sounds shaky and shady, Kev. Even if we had the money." That meant NO. And I had to agree. But that didn't stop me from thinking about it. Or, it turned out, from dreaming.

DEEP IN THE NIGHT, I felt an elevator drop a dozen stories and land on my heart. The fall left me awake and gasping for breath. I lay still until the pain was gone. George had his back turned to me and never stirred.

Out in the living room, Blanche lay above Scotty and stared unblinking into my eyes. The kid was going home the next day, and I'd hoped he'd be awake. Scott was someone who might understand the dream I'd just had. But he slept gently, openmouthed and vulnerable. He was still a child in most ways and it would have been unfair to get him involved. I wanted so much for things to turn out right for him.

That afternoon I told Addie, "I saw him off on the train first thing this morning. George kind of arranged not to be around so that Scotty and I

could talk." I shrugged. "But it wasn't the right time. His visit went okay, I guess." She made no reply.

Then I said, "I had a dream last night."

She sat across the sand table from me. I looked around the room. "You need a merry-go-round," I said. She just gestured toward shelves with dozes of horses, highstepping wood and plastic and metal ones. I nodded and made my own carousel. But the horses, instead of following each other around in a circle, faced out tails toward the center, defiant and fierce.

"Remember my telling you about the lighted railway car? The one I saw from my window when I was little? Well, last night's dream started out in this bright, loud place surrounded by dark. It was an old-fashioned barcar like one I remembered from when I was, maybe, three and my mother and I were getting off a train. That one had a bartender, lots of smoke and noise and cards. All of it had frightened me and I held on tight to my mother's hand.

"In the dream, I noticed we weren't moving forward. We were just going around and around like a carousel. And horses powered it. Outside the windows they cantered, snorted without sound, flashed their eyes, bared their teeth like guard dogs. Then I looked out into the dark and I saw a lighted window and, in it, this little kid my age and an old woman behind him. It was Aunt Tay and me.

"That's when I realized that the hand I held in the dream belonged to my mother's Shadow. And that I was my Shadow as a child looking up at me in the window. It was as if the dream was from my Shadow's memory and not my own. That's part of what woke me up." Addie's eyes narrowed a millimeter or two. This wasn't the first time I had mentioned my doppelgänger.

"After I was awake, I remembered more clearly what happened with Aunt Tay in the kitchen way back then. When she saw what was on the tracks, Tay had plunged us into darkness and pulled me back from the window not all that gently. 'It's ones like those that waste all God's light,' she told me. The way she said that scared me. So she brought me back to my bed and sang me to sleep with the old song that starts:

Go brazen light
Come healing dark."

When I was done, Addie asked, "Whose fear was it you felt in the dream?"

I thought that over without finding an answer. Then I said, "The fear triggered a pain like a weight crushing my heart." Just remembering that made the air go out of me and left me gasping there at the sand table.

Addie took my hands and asked, "Darling, how long is it since you've seen a doctor? Not counting the clap clinic?"

I couldn't remember and Addie wanted to set up an appointment with a colleague right then and there.

That's when I remembered that without Scotty we suddenly were very busy at the store and said I'd do it later. On the way back to work, I stopped at a pay phone and made a call. An answering machine came on and I said in the cop voice that lay somewhere deep in my race memory, "Johnny, this is Detective Sergeant Burke. I want to ask you some questions."

2.

The carousel's second pass through my life didn't occur at any magic interval like after seven days and seven nights, or a year and a day, or a thousand and one nights. Magic comes around with a logic beyond our understanding.

Walter and Ellen, as it turned out, never got back to me. The incident slipped out of my mind.

When I think of those years, I recall the city through a kind of fever haze. I woke up more often in the small hours feeling empty and alien. I remembered things that had been done to me by humans. A lot of the stuff, especially what happened when I was a kid, made me mad. I started to explore the anger. Some guys were turned on by the scenarios I laid out. George wasn't. I left his bedroom for his living room. Blanche watched me intently when my eyes flew open at four A.M.

One afternoon at HALF REMEMBERED THINGS, a customer was nibbling at a Robert the Robot from Ideal. Light came down the street at an angle the sun only finds in October. My mind kept jumping back to the past, ahead to the night, and it killed me to waste this day.

George came in with Andrew, the photographer who had done the

artwork on *Discovering the American Toy*. At that point, I was looking for a place of my own. As he passed the counter, George remarked, "I found these in with the laundry" and handed me a set of handcuffs.

"Thanks," I pocketed them. The cuffs were one of the toys for my Sergeant Burke persona. I had a rendezvous scheduled that evening with the guy who called himself Johnny. It occurred to me that George and Andrew had embarked on an affair and would be happy if I got out of the way. Amazingly enough, this hurt my feelings. "I'm going to lunch, if that's okay with you," I said and stalked out. I didn't return to the store that afternoon.

"With Johnny, the game is cops and robbers," I explained to Addie at her place one rainy evening shortly afterward. My head spun. The night before, in the darkened kitchen of a restaurant, empty after closing, I'd made a young guy I'd never seen before stand and deliver, cuffing his hands to a pipe, fucking him as he stood against the sinks, saying not a word.

"And you're the robber." She watched me closely.

"No, silly. I'm the undercover cop because I'm older and wear a beard and because I can do this. 'DROP THE FUCKING PANTS, MOTHER! ASSUME THE POSITION!' I learned to yell like that at military school. Not those exact commands. But the intent was the same."

My mouth was out of control. I'd never talked about this stuff with Addie or much of anyone else. "My dick is not the biggest. But it's uncut. Almost all American guys are circumcised, so that makes me exotic. When I was a kid, I looked too young. Like I looked fourteen when I was sixteen. Kids my own age weren't interested in that. They had just recently escaped being fourteen themselves. Certain older guys were turned on. And they were willing to pay. I had this whole other identity as Fred, a tough slum kid, close to the street. My Shadow fit into that. Sometimes he was Fred. Sometimes I was.

"That kind of game carries over. Like, I know that Johnny's real name is Stanley and he's a graduate student in film at NYU and not a street punk. That detracts from the scenario for me. But if he knew I was an antique dealer, it would kill the relationship."

"You mean he wouldn't love you?"

"He doesn't now." I shook my head impatiently and found it made me dizzy. "That's not the point." Sweat was on my neck and upper lip.

"I'm leaving George," I said. "We agreed. I'll look for an apartment. I have nowhere...I mean it's uncool right now at home."

Addie was shaking a thermometer I didn't remember her having a moment before. "Open up, Kev."

"Cut it out." I turned my head away.

"In your mouth, Kev, or we take it anally. Under your tongue." Addie was well used to fractious but disoriented patients. She handed me the business end of a stethoscope. "Open your shirt and put this on your chest. A little lower. Okay. Breathe deep. And exhale. "Stand up. Open your pants." She probed my groin. "How does it feel?"

"Like I'm turning a rough trick." She slapped me on the butt. "Ever think of becoming leather trade?" I asked and realized I could no longer stand.

What I remember about the next week or two is lying in Addie's big bed, soaking in her tub, while below me children spoke, sang, cried. I remember one night waking up, looking out the window and seeing a familiar figure outside the gate. My Shadow stared across the silent autumn garden. Instead of seeming tougher than me, he looked sick. And very scared.

One day George came by, bringing some of my belongings, telling me not to worry about the shop. Downstairs, I heard him whisper to Addie about a strain of very bad flu that was going around. She said I had pneumonia, then murmured something to him and he thanked her.

I remember the office of a friend of hers, a lesbian doctor who did tests on my heart. I remember sitting on the edge of the bed with Addie rubbing my back and telling her, "When I was a kid, a lot of my contact with guys was pretty brutal. Cops and perverts and relatives. I never felt I had any control. With Johnny and these other guys, it's like I replay all that but with me as the other guys. Like I'm looking for my childhood in all the wrong places."

"You're searching for your doppelgänger?"

"No. Him I have no trouble finding. The other night, I saw him. He looked unwell. Like my pneumonia was a kind of pale reflection of what he had."

My liaison with Addie lasted a couple of months while I looked for a

place to live. She taught me how to use condoms. Once or twice I thought I was a research paper of hers. Then she'd go out dressed in my clothes. Hers mostly didn't fit me.

That winter I found a large, low-ceilinged studio apartment on Mott Street. It was opposite St. Patrick's Cathedral, the old one the Irish built before they went big time up on Fifth Avenue. It was now the local parish church. Lots of mornings, I awakened to the sound of bells. But I never went inside the place.

That winter I thought that George's and my partnership would end just like our relationship. That winter too the Scott Callendars, Junior and Senior, swung back through my life. One evening Sarah called, sounding tense, to say her son had disappeared.

A few days later on a gray afternoon that promised snow, I returned to the shop from an auction and found him scarfing down hot chocolate and muffins as fast as George could serve them. "I'm in the city for keeps," he announced. "I thought you two were still together," he said, angry and hurt.

Walking to my place with Scott in his tangled hair, bomber jacket and torn jeans with thermal drawers underneath, I caught the glances directed his way. The admiration and longing was so intense as to look like resentment. Scott seemed oblivious.

Intentionally, I led him under the Gordian knot of sneakers that hung on a lamp pole at Mott and Houston. "That's the local gang. They take the shoes off kids who violate their turf and sling them over the wires."

"Cool," said Scott with barely an upward glance.

A year and a half before, his last visit had been easy. He was basically still a child and afraid to stir too far from George and me. This time an adult lurked inside him. I asked, "Seen *A Garland Knot for Children* lately?"

And he replied, "I met your Shadow today. Uptown on Lexington."

"What were you doing there?" Is there any regret sharper or stupider than for the conversations we didn't have?

"Casing the territory. I considered not telling you I was in the city. This guy spoke to me and, fucking Christ, Kevin, I thought he was you. In this decayed version of those same leathers you're wearing, stinking and needing a shave.

"And he kind of was you. He calls himself Fred, talked about what you and he did when you were a kid. Said he's old and savvy now, and I was a great-looking boy with a lot of potential. I said I was straight and he said that being queer would just get in the way. He showed me what it's like for the kids up there." Scott looked like he couldn't decide whether to vomit or cry. "Why did you let them do that stuff to you? Fuck you, Kevin were you that desperate when you were my age?"

"Lonely. Things were different then. I was looking...." But what I'd been looking for seemed too stupid to talk about. Instead I said, "You got that much trouble with my being gay, your staying here isn't going to work."

He just shook his head. "You know that's not it. I got friends that are gay. And you and George were great together. Why did you do that, Kevin? Break up with George? Your Shadow thinks that he and you aren't gay. Or straight. Or anything human. That all you want is some little corner to be warm in. Like a reptile. That's what he says. That together you don't add up to one person. That you know that. But you're scared to face it."

We stood in front of my building. My mouth tasted like rust. My life seemed worse than worthless. "Scott. I'm going to have to tell your mother you're here. She wants you back."

He stepped away from me then, ready to take flight. "Tell my mother I'll drop off the face of the earth and peddle my ass like you did. I figure it's that or the flaming cycle. Which way, Dad's way or Kevin's way? That's the question."

At that moment I felt the primal male urge to wipe the defiance off this kid's face, to hand him the same bad times I remembered. But one more wrong move by me and he'd go back to my Shadow. I would lose him forever.

From somewhere I found it in me to say, "Maybe you got sent here to teach me patience or humility or something. If you enroll in school and work in the store, I'll ask your mother if you can stay."

A day or two later, Scott came home barefoot, lips white with rage. What I wanted to do was yell at him and call the cops. What I did was check to make sure he wasn't actually tracking blood and order pizza with pepperoni, his favorite food that year. Next morning before dawn Scott slipped out of the apartment wearing old shoes, with a familiar book under

his arm. I heard him go up to the roof and did not follow him. Naturally, I couldn't go back to sleep.

He returned that evening with the shoes slung over his shoulder wearing a tight grin and expensive sneakers I hadn't seen before.

"Those belonged to the guy who did it to you?"

"There were a few of them who jumped me. These were the best pair that fit. Today, they were all real happy to toss their shoes up on the wire and run home crying to their mamas. Everyone saw. Their girlfriends stayed and talked with me."

"But that's all that happened to the guys?"

"Except, maybe, a singed eyebrow or two. And their blades getting too hot to handle. I kicked all the knives down the sewer."

"Okay. But I don't want to see the *Garland Knot* around here again. And I'm going to give you a number. This woman is Dr. Addie Kemper. I'd like you to talk to her." Scott nodded and shook my hand like we had sealed a deal.

Sarah, but not her husband, visited a couple of times. She didn't go into what had gone on between the two of them and Scotty. She didn't need to; having him around, I could imagine. Scott got enrolled in the hip and private LITTLE RED SCHOOL HOUSE not far from the store. Sarah agreed to have him see Addie. I got screens to divide my place. But I had lost my privacy. I couldn't bring guys home. And I lost my peace of mind. I worried about the kid every moment he wasn't in my sight. And mostly wanted to strangle him when he was.

George saved my life or at least what remained of my sanity by asking if Scott could stay with him the last half of each month. "That way I'll know he's getting fed half the time," he said. And, "I'm glad you're being sensible about child custody. That ruins so many divorces."

The carousel swung back into my dreams one dismal Ash Wednesday morning. Lights twirled in the dark as I spun around and around. The barker's voice was loud and his rap was strange. As I rode past I heard him say, "...SAILING INTO THE SUNSHINE OUT OF THE RAIN...." Then he was lost in the waltz music until I came by again. "...WHERE WE SEE OUR OWN CHILDHOODS...."

On one side I passed the lighted midway, on the other I looked out onto the night and a streetcar stop. On one circuit I caught sight of a car

rolling to a halt. I was pulled away as the passengers boarded. On the next spin, I saw a kid at a car window, real young, his face clenched so that he couldn't cry out his fear and pain. The car hurtled off into the dark, and I was pulled back toward the light of the carnival. It was as if my heart been torn in two, so deeply did our separating rip me.

And then I was gasping for breath, afraid to move until the angina died away, alone in my place down on Mott Street. Scott was with George. And the kid had pretty much put an end to any affairs I'd been having.

So, I disentangled myself from the covers, pulled on a knee-length T-shirt and went to the kitchen area. Out the window were the worn, brick-walled yards and buildings of the old cathedral. St. Patrick's, with its Irish names on the war memorials, Italian priests and nuns and a mostly Spanish congregation, was just a shade grander than a normal parish church. Down on Prince Street, junkies seeped in as Little Italy ebbed. But on this block bells tolled and kids in uniforms came out of the church with black crosses of ashes on their foreheads.

My chest felt as if it had a huge empty hole right in the middle, like I was a cartoon character shot through by a cannon ball. I sipped tea and remembered Queen of Heaven parish, my old neighborhood in Boston.

Near the parish was a streetcar line that ran from Ashmont Station through Dorchester Lower Mills along the Neponset River, over marshes, past small patches of trees and clumps of houses built on firmer ground and out to Mattapan.

Along this route, at the end of the summer when I was twelve, a carnival pitched camp on an empty lot just beyond the tidal marshes. It featured nickel-a-pitch booths and cotton candy and hot dog stands, air rifle galleries, a Ferris wheel, a merry-go-round with smiling horses and a pony ride that gave a circus tang to the air.

It also had a sideshow tent closed to kids under sixteen unaccompanied by an adult. My friend Murph and I went to the fair one day, mainly on my nickels and quarters. I said the sideshow was stupid and a fake and he agreed. But it had a pull that we both felt.

Murph was thirteen and could claim to be fifteen without getting much argument. In the subtly shifting alliances of the street, he began hanging around with kids older than he was and I tagged along with him. But I was already going to school downtown which made me an outsider.

Murph and the other guys were all a good growth spurt or two ahead of me. It was 1956 and Elvis had sung. They wore pompadours and pointed shoes while I was still dressed like a little kid.

I was there when they planned to go to the carnival that night. I said nothing about it at home, just showed up at Curtis Park after dinner with all the change from my bank. There were maybe half a dozen kids, a couple I knew only vaguely. They looked at me slit-eyed. Murph shrugged and whispered something. On the streetcar out, a couple of them slipped past the motorman without paying. They shouted out the open car windows as we passed over the marshes in the August twilight.

The carnival by dusk was aglow and loud, bursts of "Stars and Stripes Forever" blending with merry-go-round music. The guys were noisy, pushing each other, laughing, looking for stuff to swipe. Admission to the tent was fifty cents. We circled around looking for a way in.

"If they say sixteen, they mean fourteen. We need money." They all looked at me.

"Hey, your shirt's out!" Suddenly, my jersey got pulled up over my face. Hands emptied my pockets. I heard change hit the ground. "Pants him!" I broke free, spun away.

"Watch it, you jerk!" I had smashed into the bald, indignant father of a family. The kids, when I turned, were walking away laughing as Murph counted the change he'd taken and no amount of squinting could keep back tears.

Then a man said, "You okay, son?" and put his hand on my arm. He was tall, serious looking. He must have seen me in trouble and come to help. He picked up some dimes that had dropped and put them in my jersey pocket. "Are you hurt?" I shook my head. What had happened was too bad even to think about. Behind him was light and music, the merry-go-round.

"Is there anything you want? A Coke?" People seeing us together would think he was my father. He kept his arm around me and I wanted so much for them to think that. Then he said, "Like to go on the rides?" Putting his hands on my shoulders, he guided me to the carousel. People sailed by on the horses, shards of dark and light making them look like bits of broken mirrors.

And I knew that if this guy put me up there, I too would shatter.

Spooked, I broke out of his grasp. "Hey, get back here!" All of a sudden he was furious. He tried to grab me and I ran.

As I recalled that on an Ash Wednesday morning, the phone rang and a woman said, "Mr. Grierson, this is Ellen Clark. A year or two ago, I showed you a merry-go-round."

I managed to tell her, "There was a problem with authentication. Like who owned it. You ever straighten that out?" It wasn't that I cared. Not like George did. But it felt to me as if the dream had evoked the carousel, and that scared me a bit.

"We've got papers, Mr. Grierson. We've also got a guy who says he can have it up and running?"

My breath ran shallow. This could mean a lot of money. Enough to make me independent of George. And it fascinated me. I couldn't deny that. "Same place?"

"No. You're still interested? We'll be in touch."

That afternoon, I sat in Addie's and told her all I had dreamed and remembered. "What happened after the night at the carnival?" she asked.

"That fall, my pubic hairs sprouted. I practiced a hard-eyed smile in front of the mirror. I discovered places where guys would tell me I was a good kid and give me pocket money."

"In return for which you were molested."

"Kind of like now."

Because I had told her about waking up with a pain in my chest, I sat with my shirt opened and Addie examining me. "Do you use butyl-nitrite?" she asked.

"Poppers? No. Why?"

"Because your heartbeat is irregular, which makes that a risky activity. Besides, you know a lot of gay men are getting very sick. There's a theory that poppers might be a cause."

I shrugged. The "gay disease" was part of the background noise of the city.

Then Addie said, "It's interesting that the carousel dream evoked a memory of the carnival when you were twelve." I hadn't even told her about the memory having evoked the telephone call about the carousel.

George and I didn't talk a whole lot at that point. So at the store I didn't mention the call or much of anything else. Then Scott, who was supposed to come to work that afternoon, came in late and just stood staring at me and saying nothing. There were customers present, so I motioned him into the back room and asked what was wrong.

"I saw your Shadow again. It was interesting. He talked about my father's accident. He said he provided the acid my old man took. And he knew what it was going to do but you managed not to know. He says you wanted me as your kid. I think he's right. So, now you got a genuine reptile son and what am I supposed to do?"

My voice come out tight, choked. "Scott, when you were two years old, I found your old man throwing lighted matches at you. I wasn't in any position to call the police. My instinct was to save your life by getting your father away from you." I was somewhere between anger and anguish. "Maybe I was wrong."

Scott turned and was gone. I heard the front door slam. George was alone in the store.

"That does it," I told him. "The kid goes home to his mother or goes out on the street."

George couldn't help himself. He looked at me with concern. "Kevin, take it easy. And don't talk that way."

"Listen, if I die, he's what's going to kill me. If you want, you can have him full time. He'd prefer that."

"You're what he talks about. You and that girl with the huge breasts who works at Zito's bakery. However he expresses it, he adores you. And, honey, I will testify that you don't make that easy."

At Addie's, by her invitation and Scott's, I sat with her and watched him at the sand table. He made a landscape of houses and cars and, in its midst, built two mounds. On one he placed a colorful toy Shaman and on the other a plastic motorcyclist.

"It's like these two wizards fight," he said. "These powerful spirits. Over me."

"I'm not a wizard. Scott. I'm just a fool who did a lot of stupid stuff," I told him when he was finished. "I've wondered, you know, if I did it. Killed your old man. For the reasons that you said. And I don't know. I don't fucking know. Maybe I was looking for a son. You asked how I could

do the stuff I did when I was a kid? The reason is so stupid it's pathetic. I was looking for a father."

"Me too," said Scott.

ELLEN CLARK called the store on a snowy day right after that. She gave me an address way downtown around the corner from Desbrosses Street and made an appointment for that afternoon. I was willing to forget how scared I'd been the last time. Mystery drew me and the idea that this merry-go-round held my dreams and was worth a fortune. Carousel horses were selling for five figures.

Scott and George were both there. I told nobody where I was going. The snow fell fast and steady. Big wet flakes. Cars drove with their lights on. Taxis had all disappeared. Sound was distant, and the air smelled of ice and iron as I walked alone down the West Side, not even looking to see if I was followed.

A silver stillness hung over Desbrosses Street and what was left of old Iron-Bound Lower Manhattan. Just to the south new office towers rose. Here, snow fell on cobblestones and on the silent river. The building at the address I'd been given might have been an old meetinghouse, a public hall of some kind. Not even stopping to wonder how and why they had moved the carousel, I climbed wide, unshoveled steps and rang the bell.

Just then I had a sudden flashback to a winter years before when I was still very strung out. My Shadow and I rode a freight elevator with two guys whose heads flickered like pilot lights. In a voice only I could hear, my double said, "They're fucking zookeepers, man. They are going to put us in a freak show like we're the two-headed boy. Straights from another dimension will pay a quarter apiece to toss peanuts to a boy and his doppelgänger."

The elevator door had opened on a cellar that stretched away like a cave. "Run!" My Shadow dashed one way and I tried to go the other. I got slammed hard. The floor come up and whacked out my lights. But I woke up in a hospital.

As I remembered that, the door before me opened. Ellen stood in sunglasses and a fake fur coat. As I stepped inside, I saw Al dead-eyed right behind her.

Until that moment, I could have backed off. Just then, my option got taken away. Feet pounded on the snow. Scott rushed up, saying, "I'm with him."

Before I could say no, he was inside and the door shut behind us. Ellen and Al exchanged a glance I couldn't read.

Stairs to either side of the cold and dusty lobby led to a balcony. Peeling figures on the WPA mural above the auditorium doors showed something like the Sons of Labor offering the Fruits of Industry to the Goddess of Liberty.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I muttered.

"Watching out for you," Scott said. And I noticed the *Garland Knot* stuck in his pocket like a pistol in a holster.

"The item is right in here." Ellen and Al watched me as I pushed open the auditorium door. A stage with a raised speaker's platform and lectern ran along the far wall. In another time, dances, strike votes, political rallies must have taken place on the wide, worn floor. Now it supported the carousel.

Harsh ceiling lights shone down cruelly on cracked wood and peeling paint. It could have been pathetic. But the horses themselves, eyes savage and teeth bared, made Scott whisper, "Holy shit!"

Ellen and Al stayed near the door. I wondered how they had gotten this thing in here. I wondered what had happened to Walt. I walked over to the carousel. Scott stuck with me like he was glued. His presence meant there was more at stake. He might get hurt because of his stupidity. And mine.

Still I couldn't help but stare. In the last year or so I had looked at lots of carousels up close and in pictures. I'd found nothing like this. Vlask, a turn-of-the-century Czech designer, had done work somewhat in this vein. But not as visceral. I calculated that, broken down and sold piece-meal, this thing would be worth half a million easily.

Somewhere behind us, Al spoke. Scott looked that way, reached into his pocket. "We have it hooked to an electric generator. You and the kid can sit up there and test it out." I shook my head. It occurred to me that I didn't feel well.

The lights above us flickered, a low rumble began, the carousel horses started to move. I heard a voice, alternately quiet and loud as if the barker

was aboard a spinning merry-go-round "...life of Kevin Grierson in ALL ITS MUNDANITY AND HORROR. SEE HIS FRIENDS AND LOVER...as they are and as they will...."

My head spun. I couldn't catch my breath.

There was George up on a horse along with everyone else I knew from Johnny to Addie. "...be, SAILING OUT OF THE FUTURE INTO THE PRESENT. SEE HIS FORMER LOVER struck down with the gay..." As they passed before me, everyone aged and some changed horribly. "...sees himself AND HIS OWN FATE."

"KEVIN!" I turned to see Scott beside me facing the door. Ellen stood back there like she was ready to flee. Al had his hand on a lever. "You like our merry-go-round, Mr. Grierson, you'll love the rest of our carnival. In fact, you'll be a part of it, you and your friend Fred. Now that we have you, we should be able to nab him easily. Siamese twins will be nothing compared to you two. Stand aside, kid."

A pair of guys I hadn't noticed before moved out from behind the carousel. They flickered in the light. "Turn it off," Scott yelled. "It's making him sick!" He pulled out the book and said, very quietly, "If they take him, I go with him."

He fanned the pages and a tiny ball of flame flew like a bullet. One of the guys reached inside his jacket. The flame was a burning motorcycle and rider. It hit the guy's hand and he howled. The cycle bounced off him and caught the other guy above the ear. He cried and beat his smoldering hair.

Ellen had disappeared. Al ducked as Scott Callendar Senior and his flaming cycle hit the transformer with a shower of sparks.

The next thing I heard was a strangled scream as a giant hand squeezed my chest and forced all the air out of my lungs. Then I was flat on the auditorium floor. Electrical wires smoldered and an icicle was rammed into my heart. I was all alone as the cold spread up my arms and legs. Scott raced back into the room, threw aside the book, fell down, and held me. His tears felt hot.

"Don't die, Kevin. I called the ambulance. Don't die on me. I need you so much."

Snow made the sirens muffled and slow. "I won't," I heard myself say. "For that, I'll live," I said, and the cold stopped creeping.

3.

Only later and by degrees did I understand all that I had promised on a snowy afternoon just off Desbrosses Street. My life after that held shocks but no surprises, like watching a movie when you've already seen extended coming attractions.

The carousel's reappearance seemed inevitable. In tales of magic, there is always a third time.

It came back in the first bloom of spring. On the plane from Boston, I saw the land grow greener as we flew south. I'd been at the funeral of the last of my uncles so it must have been '87. Everyone had said how well I looked. And how prosperous. As if they were rehearsing the lines to be used at my own wake.

A few of the old ones, knowing the family history, may have been searching for a manifestation of the Shadow. But even that connection to my clan seems severed. So far as I have seen and heard, no relative of my generation or the next has shown any hint of a double. Checking that out was my only good reason for going back. I wondered if Me and My Shadow were the last of our kind and if Al had been right in trying to nab us for a zoo.

Younger cousins looked for the telltale signs of my sexuality and my heart trouble. The first I express in a slight alienation at these gatherings, the other by a slight stiffness of the soul, a wariness of rapture. I stayed at the Copley and went back to New York the next morning.

Trees were budding in Stuyvesant Park when I got home. I'd bought a co-op that winter and had just begun to settle in. The previous weekend Scott and a young lady named Lise had stayed with me on their way out to Long Island. From all I saw and heard they were very much in love. It amazed me that Scott was graduating from college in May.

Only after my multiple bypass did he tell me it was my Shadow who had warned him I was in danger. "He said I was the only one who could save you. He said otherwise you and he were going to end up in a sideshow in some circle of hell. He thinks they'll stay away after meeting up with my dad."

As I unpacked, I wondered what would have happened if he hadn't pulled my attention away from the carousel. Would the sight of my future

self, my destiny, whatever that might be, have killed the curiosity and endless hope that keeps us all alive?

On my answering machine, Addie said, "Kevin, a patient felt she couldn't create an African Palace. Any ideas?" I would call her later. Addie was a certainty in my life. I had already seen her ride through middle age, serene and wise on a wild-eyed wooden horse.

Since it was still early on that spring day I walked over to the store. George's *Discovering the American Toy* was about to come out in a second edition. I still took out my copy of the original and read the dedication: "For Kevin Grierson, a partner in wonder."

At HALF REMEMBERED THINGS, George sat at the counter doing our taxes. Details like that impressed me. If I was HIV positive, nothing else would ever enter my mind. He took every precaution, held onto his health and waited for the cure I knew wasn't coming. I alone had seen him, defaced and broken by full-blown AIDS, swing out of the future into that old meeting hall.

"How did it go, Kev?" he asked.

"Okay. Kind of jolly. Considering it was a wake and funeral." My life, as I've said, contained no surprises. But it was a shock on a bright afternoon to glance down and spot at George's elbow photos of fierce carousel horses, stacked like cordwood in what seemed to be a cellar.

George noticed my interest. "Somseone found a disassembled merry-go-round in a barn out in Buck's County. Wants me to authenticate it. The price on this stuff has gone through the roof. Maybe we can drive down Sunday and see it."

He said more, but I felt chilled. Outside the store, tourists stared at the five-story doll apartment house in our window. I turned and started to tell George I thought we could find better ways to spend our time off. His head was down on the counter and he was sobbing.

"Everything scares me, Kev. When I opened the envelope this morning and saw those stupid wooden horses, all I could think about was how Larry looked before he went. And Eric. The dementia...Kaposi's...the Goddamn diapers...Oh Jesus, I feel so sick some mornings when I wake up. And I'm scared even to say it!"

And I wished we had blinds, so I could draw them and stop the eyes of the world from witnessing the misery of this gentle man. Instead, I

crossed the store and put my arms around him, crooned the ancient sounds of comfort that we all know. And that we all can utter if we just let ourselves.

Over dinner the next night, I told Addie. "I tore up the photos. Someone else can look at the horses. I slept on George's couch last night. So he wouldn't be alone. He zonked out just like always. Around three in the morning, I woke up from a dream and felt another presence in the room. Someone cautious and wary. But curious about what he saw.

"Then I remembered the dream I'd just had. It was the recurring one where the streetcar with a kid on board rolls away from the carnival. He's ordinary enough, blond, kind of small. A real young twelve. The pain in his eyes, the way he sits like he's been hit, remind me of how they say that Italians bounce back but, when the Irish get hurt, they stay hurt.

"He's me, of course, age twelve. I think of him as Kev. He doesn't seem as scared as he once was. It's him I sense when I wake up in the middle of the night. Not my Shadow. Not anymore."

"What's your Shadow up to these days?" Addie asked like she was inquiring after one of my relatives whom she'd never met.

"He's still around," I said. "People see him. I'm sure he knows about Kev. Sooner or later the kid is going to head this way. I want it to be me he goes to and not my Shadow."

Addie smiled and seemed to approve. It's hard to know how crazy she thinks I am. We went on to talk about miniature hand-carved tribal masks, about toy columns and arches the color of sandstone with which a child could make an African palace as twisted and magnificent as a dream.





Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Rose Daughter, by Robin McKinley, Greenwillow Books, 1997, \$16.

SOME TIME ago I reviewed Susan Wilson's *Beauty* in these pages (December 1996), remarking at the time that the story of beauty and the beast seems to be one of the fairy tales that is returned to again and again, by writers, the producers of films and TV series, and even the creators of feature-length cartoons and Broadway productions. One of the writers I cited was Robin McKinley, whose own *Beauty* (1978) remains a classic in the field.

Setting beauty beside a beast can make for a powerful metaphor, never mind a fascinating visual image. The one highlights the other, defines the other, allowing us to consider our own perceptions and misperceptions in the light and shadows each casts on the other. So it's little wonder that writers are

drawn to the story. What I did find surprising, when *Rose Daughter* appeared in my mail box, was that an author who had already visited the tale should return to it herself. But that's exactly what McKinley has done—and from her afterword, it appears that she was as surprised to find herself writing the book as I was to be reading it.

Now it's been almost twenty years since I read her earlier retelling of the tale, and I don't have it nearly as fresh in my mind as I'd like, so I won't be making a great many comparisons between the two books here. I do remember being enchanted with her version of the story in that earlier book, drawn in by the music of her language and her ability to make such a well-known story feel new once more.

Surprisingly, she has managed to pull it off a second time.

All the elements of the fairy tale are here: kind-hearted Beauty, the youngest of three sisters, the father coming to the Beast's castle/

mansion and, when he attempts to leave with the rose Beauty has asked him to bring back from his travels, is forced to give up his daughter to the Beast; and, of course, the Beast himself, a Gothic, fairy tale Heathcliff, terrifying at first, becoming more sympathetic the more we, through Beauty, get to know him.

But if there are no surprises in the story, no real deviation from how we expect events to unfold, there is a richness of character and details, and such a warmth in her prose and storytelling ability, that the fact she follows the tried-and-true path becomes rather irrelevant.

In a longer chapbook version of the afterword that accompanied the promotional material of the book, McKinley goes into more detail as to how she came to be telling this story for a second time, explaining how it grew, in part, from her closing and selling off her beloved cottage home in Maine to move to England to be with her husband. There, in an English cottage with its large gardens, as opposed to the cottage in Maine where the growing season is approximately a few minutes between spring and fall, she grew to love the gardens in her new home, and loved working in those same gardens.

This proves to be the heart of *Rose Daughter*. The novel becomes a love affair with the cottage to which Beauty and her family move after their father goes bankrupt and they lose everything in the city where they've lived all their lives. And it becomes a love affair with one's working of the land, exemplified in the novel by Beauty's discovery of her own gift for gardening, both at the new cottage, and in the immense greenhouse of the Beast's mansion.

There are many deft touches in *Rose Daughter* that one won't find in the original tale — new characters, fascinating settings, curious and entertaining asides — but they aren't why one should read the book. Read it for the warmth and charm that spill out from the page even in the story's darkest moments. And read it because, I would think, this is a case of readers being able to get as close as one can get to sharing a piece of the treasure that lies deep in an author's heart.

The Seraphim Rising, by Elisabeth DeVos, Roc, 1997, \$5.99.

One of this column's readers wrote to me recently to say, "In reading the current issue of *F&SF*, I noticed your comments about be-

ing tired of the same-old same-old. If it's something truly different that you seek, please permit me to suggest *The Seraphim Rising*." So I tried it. And our correspondent was right.

A touchstone to the theme behind the novel might be some of James Morrow's more recent work, such as *Only Begotten Daughter* (What if Jesus has a sister and she was born today?) and *Towing Jehovah* (What if there was a god, only he's dead and his two-mile long corpse has been found floating in the ocean?), except where Morrow considers the questions satirically, DeVos approaches them matter-of-factly, in the mode of a near-future thriller.

Quick backstory to *The Seraphim Rising*: Thirty years before the book opens, golden eggs dropped from space and landed in the ocean. Twenty years later, they opened and six angels arose from the eggs, kept aloft by their enormous wings. They claim to have come to open the gateway to paradise. We join the story as the angels identify the new messiah: Harry Chen, a drugged-out creator of VR programs, the most notable being *Freak Follies*, in which he rants against everything the angels stand for.

Our viewpoint character is Carson McCullough — a personal liaison to the angel Ezekiel — who happens to have grown up with

Chen. Having fled the seminary in a crisis of faith, McCullough is now facing another. His angel charge keeps bolting, the men for whom McCullough works use what he believes is unnecessary force to bring Ezekiel back into the fold, and then there's Chen. One thing McCullough knows for sure: whatever else he might be, Harry Chen is no savior.

DeVos does a fine job in bringing to life her near-future world where the church and various governments all vie for control of these creatures that some accept as messengers from God, others as scouts for an imminent alien invasion. All of the different factions want a piece of the action, but Chen has his own ideas as to what the messiah's responsibilities should be and the situation quickly escalates out of everyone's control.

Once it starts rolling, the novel's momentum keeps to a rapid pace, and one doesn't notice so much that, except for McCullough, most of the cast are character types, rather than individuals. And happily, DeVos doesn't ignore the fascinating theological repercussions of the events she describes. Her take on these elements is different from Morrow's, as one would hope and expect, but no less thought-provoking.

A Dry Spell, by Susie Moloney, Doubleday, 1997, \$23.95

"The next Bob Dylan." "In the tradition of Tolkien." It isn't fair, but we use touchstones all the time — shortcut descriptions that convey the flavor of a work and are difficult to live up to. The one I've heard bandied about in regards to Susie Moloney's new novel is Stephen King.

Now pretty much everyone who's ever written a horror novel has probably had the King tag put on their work at some point or another, but in this case it's not far off the mark. I don't know if Moloney has King's staying power, and her work doesn't quite have the driving pulse of storytelling that underlies the best of King's novels, but there's a flavor in her clean prose and, especially, in the relaxed manner she's able to bring her characters to life that, if not exactly reminiscent of King, is certainly as accomplished. Even brief walk-on roles are infused with a judicious eye for just the right amount of telling detail.

The principal action centers around these four, the most powerful of whom rarely makes an on-stage appearance:

Karen Grange is the bank manager of Goodlands' only bank. As the drought that's hit the town

works its way through year four, it's her sorry task to foreclose on the mortgages held by her neighbors.

Mary O'Hare was murdered a hundred years ago. Since her death, she's harbored a bitter grudge that's come, over time, to include the whole town.

Vida Whalley, from the poor side of town, also harbors a grudge against the people of Goodlands, so she becomes the perfect host for O'Hare's spirit. It's through Whalley that we learn the little we know of O'Hare.

And then there's Tom Keatley, the rainmaker, a contemporary hobo, wandering the backroads of America who, when asked, "How do you make it rain?" inevitably replies, "I make it rain for fifty bucks."

Keatley's arrival is the catalyst that moves the dry hatred of O'Hare and Whalley from manifesting as a passive, if deadly, drought, to an escalating supernatural struggle that finally culminates in a classic confrontation between the four in the middle of a dust storm.

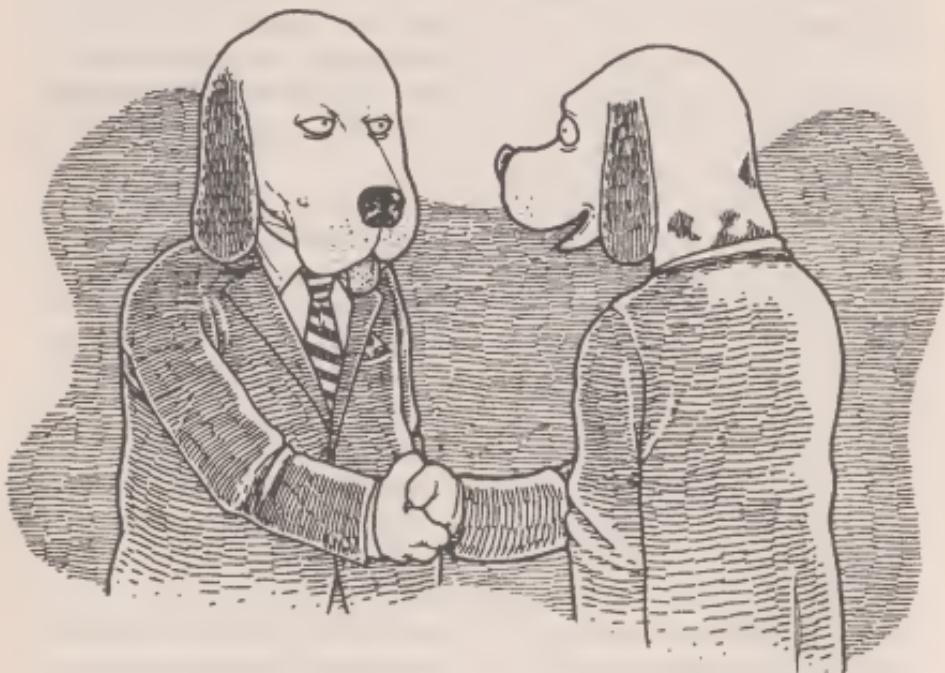
But, at least from this reader's point of view, the intricacies of the plot weren't nearly as fascinating as Moloney's characters. I was far more interested in how Moloney played out their personalities, from

the flashbacks of Keatley's wandering days and the shame of what brought Grange to manage the Goodlands bank, to the everyday lives of the townsfolk as they tried to cope with the terrible drought. In other words, the people. Which, come to think about it, is what I like the best about King's books when he's on a roll.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. 

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"May I say, sir, what a pleasure it has been sniffing your butt?"



BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

The Man Who Walked to the Moon, by Howard McCord, McPherson & Company, \$18.

Into the Forest, by Jean Hegland, Bantam, \$21.95.

"Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?"

IF ALL THE world's a stage, then the literature of science fiction and fantasy must surely make its entrance as Barnum — all flourishes and razzle dazzle, cheap glamour and mad gesticulations as it heralds the excitements to come: See the Dark Lord Defeated by Plucky Halflings! Gasp at the Woman-Man, Giving Birth in a World of Winter! Witness the Boy with an Accounting-Machine in His Head, Laying Waste to the Corporate Empires of the East! For good or ill, we are a genre of (excessive) excess. Excess is what we expect to find when we crack the spine of the latest offering of Kelvin J.

Gatheringhood or M.R.R. (nee Misty) Hawkweed, and excess is what we reward. Prismatic description, global collapse, flamboyant characters (but not, *hilas!* characterization) and colorful earthy peoples, World Building and Subsequent Destruction...our genre is a crowded, noisy place, and thus usually eschewed by the literary mainstream — unless they are slumming, in which case they want the noisiest experience available. White noise will do (think Don DeLillo or William Gibson) and so will mad-eyed raving (think Thomas Pynchon), as well as the more pedestrian fulminations of Thomas Clancy or David Brin.

This makes sense, when one considers that the longest shadow cast across the American literary landscape of the last twenty years is that of Raymond Carver. If science fiction and fantasy echo as thunderclap and sonic boom, mainstream fiction has long been a reactionary *Shhhh*. But in one of those odd reversals so beloved of our

Victorian ancestors, the mainstream has of late seen its banks overflow with sesquipedal fabulists like A.S. Byatt and Arundhati Roy and David Foster Wallace. Meanwhile, the most striking genre books I've encountered this year have been distinctly understated: M. John Harrison's spare, heartwrenching *Signs of Life* and a pair of first novels, Howard McCord's *The Man Who Walked to the Moon* and Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest*.

Howard McCord is best-known as an essayist and poet. *The Man Who Walked to the Moon* is a novella, and a terse one at that. Its narrator is fifty-year-old William Gasper, a self-described assassin who lives a hermetic existence in the arid Steen Mountains of Nevada, a desert "as lovely as new skin." Gasper is a veteran of the Korean War, a Marine sharpshooter and sometime stringer for the CIA who understands guns the way other men understand women.

I was guilty of capital crimes in twenty-three countries, and so I could take my pick of punishments legally due: garrote, guillotine, poison gas, electricity, noose, firing squad, lethal injection or batter-

ing by steel bar as in Uganda under Amin.

William Gasper rents a packing crate behind a gas station for twelve dollars a month, and sleeps there when the weather is bad; but most of his days are spent walking The Moon, a mountain he knows and loves as keenly as his Swiss 9mm SIG P210 pistol. "It has become like no other mountain. Calm as I would wish to be, am. A shadow taken up substance..." On The Moon, Gasper sleeps sometimes within a stone hut he constructed, and other times under the stars. He eats insects, grasshoppers and roasted ants, and fortifies himself at sunset with a mouthful of brandy. "A tot of cognac and a can of pears can ease the consciousness of an Augustine brooding on imagined sins, or sate a womanless satyr." Occasionally he downs a grouse with a stone, and eats it raw; or shoots a deer.

I watched them silently and admired the utter simplicity of a deer's mind. It was a machine much like the one that hummed between my own ears, but tuned to a Euclidean shyness, a world of coherent forms, or regu-

larity, and it lacked ambiguity to the extent that it was fundamentally alien to human consciousness, awash in the stuff.

William Gasper is a figure more familiar to us from the pages of the daily newspaper than a novel. He is the brilliant autodidact who becomes the Unabomber, the paid assassin whose gun reminds him of Rilke's panther; the late-century, murderous Odysseus who stalks Neil Young's "Ambulance Blues."

His existence is so utterly stripped down, so rawly in touch with the natural world, that it takes on an almost voluptuous sensuality. The character he most closely resembles is not the assassin of DeLillo's *Libra*, but the postulant heroine of Ron Hansen's gorgeous *Mariette in Ecstasy*, another novel that probes the outermost limits of transcendental experience. Hansen's adolescent Mariette achieves union with her Christ, but McCord raises the supernatural bar for his protagonist: he has Gasper communing with the Welsh death-goddess Cerridwen, who first visits him in a fishing boat off the North Korean coast. She promises him that he'll see her again in this world, "as well as when you die." Hereafter

she appears sporadically to Gasper; more often, she sends her murderous familiar in pursuit, a creature known as the Palug cat which, this time, manifests itself as a man with a British passport, a roll of Kruger-rands, and a Remington BDL rifle. Gasper kills the Palug cat as neatly as those animals he slays when he grows tired of eating bugs; then strips the man of valuables and stuffs the body in a crevice atop The Moon. Later he carries out more killings (and a rescue) with as little fanfare, and finally retreats to a "Ranch on the River Sorrow, where I type these words on an old Royal 440."

The Man Who Walked to the Moon is an extraordinary book. It completely confounds one's expectations of the fantastic novel, but the mysteries at its heart — death and survival, an almost primeval experience of the natural world — are transcendental mysteries. Reading this slender volume is like peering into the primal cauldron of Cerridwen herself, and glimpsing there the very acts of death and regeneration: ghastly, terrifying, and ultimately miraculous.

If this is a story, it is not a romance, unless Cerridwen's doting attention could be so construed. It is,

as far as the teller knows, a veritable account of a lucid insanity of long duration, an oblique confession, an *apologia pro viota sua*, a fantasy spin in a cold winter, or out of night.

Jean Hegland's first book was *The Life Within: Celebration of a Pregnancy*, a slightly New Ageish but elegantly penned account of the warm fertile biosphere of parturition. Her first novel, *Into the Forest*, shares the earnestly gravid atmosphere of her non-fiction work. Readers of *Mothering Magazine* or parents of children educated at Waldorf schools will recognize the touchstones here: an extremely intelligent and artistic nature coupled with an ecosensitivity that can be grating, even to those of us who recycle religiously, give our children echinacea tincture in lieu of Robitussin and eschew disposable diapers.

Happily, *Into the Forest* is so thrillingly written that it becomes a page turner from its very start. Eva and Nell (and don't think the Dickensian-American Transcendentalist echo of those names is an accident, buster!) are teenage sisters orphaned in the dark forest and left to rely only upon their wits and each other. But theirs is not the

tangled Victorian wilderness this premise might suggest. It is Northern California circa Now, with a deep background of global terrorism, eco-collapse, communications shutdown and rampant viruses. Said backdrop is cursorily (though believably) dispensed with in the opening pages. Distant warfare, killer bacteria: who's gonna argue? The two girls have been lovingly homeschooled by their mother, a former professional ballerina, and their father, a school principal-cum-handyman who has conveniently outfitted their house with a gas generator as well as 50,000 baud modems, CD players and all those other things as indispensable to modern life as chamber maids and cooks were to our Victorian ancestors. Nell has high SAT scores and aims for Harvard; Eva plans to follow in her mother's pliés and join the San Francisco Ballet.

But then disaster strikes (cancer, chain saw accident) and the girls are marooned. What follows is a beautifully rendered exegesis of the tactics of survival, and the most realistic portrayal of a near-future disaster as I have read.

This doesn't mean that *Into the Forest* reads as non-fiction, though Hegland obviously adores the lavish details of frontier domes-

ticity she recreates here: gathering wild foods, killing a feral sow, making a cottage sensibility to this novel which outweighs the occasionally cumbersome plot elements. These can be melodramatic — rape, pillage, wild beasts, childbirth, abandonment — but Hegland's point is that life in its essence is melodramatic, once you flense it of the distractions of television and even Art. She stacks the deck, Swiss Family Robinson-style, by giving Eva and Nell a good deal of what they need to survive; but Hegland's writing is so lovely that I was willing to forgive her almost everything. Her heroines' literary predecessors are the two sisters in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," needing only each other for emotional and physical sustenance. Hegland one-ups those two by making her siblings nearly parthenogenic. A rape leaves Eva pregnant, but her baby is carried to term and delivered with as much aplomb as though he were conceived in vitro — and when Eva's milk doesn't come in, Nell nurses the infant. The end of *Into the Forest* is its beginning: the two sisters and baby Burl forsake their childhood home, burning the house behind them and choosing to take their chances with the wilderness rather than with the maraud-

ing humans who've started sniffing around the place. There is hope of reunion with Nell's lover, and certainty that the forest will provide.

I don't buy Hegland's ultimate vision of humanity re-entering Eden, even in Northern California. In what reads like a revisionist take on George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949), brainy Nell lets her father's library burn along with the failing homestead, telling herself that "the life we were entering was one in which books would not matter. I thought of Eva waiting for me in the front yard, reminded myself that the encyclopedia had abandoned me during her labor, that no book had prepared me to save my father's life."

But in fact it is Nell's very bookish intelligence that enables her to survive, just as Eva's kinetic memory of ballet keeps her alive. For the two sisters to forsake the arts that nourished them seems slightly churlish, if not downright insane: Art sustains us as much as acorn flour. Maybe more so, when the barbarians are at our gates, when the barbarians are us. Still, *Into the Forest* is an exhilarating, visionary novel, a fin-de-siècle fairy tale with that rarest of endings: the girls get each other, and a baby boy, and a bear, and everyone lives happily ever after, in the woods. 



EDITOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

THERE WAS A time when science fiction book publishing was predominantly in paperback. Times change, economies shift, and nowadays it seems like hardcovers get the lion's share of attention. But there are plenty of books coming out now in mass-market format, and after bingeing on them this month I found lots worth reading.

Scott Westerfeld's *Polymorph* (Roc) features a title character born with the ability to change shape — or gender — with a little mental exertion. Mostly s/he uses the ability for kicks eking out a living in near-future New York, but when love and another polymorph enter the picture, things get complicated. The plot never quite reached boiling temperature for me, but the ideas of this post-cyberpunk story are good and the future downtown club scene has some very nice touches.

Speaking of ideas, Howard V.

Hendrix's debut *Lightpaths* (Ace) has lots of them — about utopia, science, the future — and never lacks for characters to expound them. This is a Novel of Big Ideas and won't satisfy readers looking for deep characterization, but there's enough provocative thought here to make the speechifying worthwhile.

Final Orbit by S. V. Dàte was shelved in the sf section because of its starscape cover and the title, but it's actually a thriller featuring a retired astronaut and murders linked to NASA. Had this book been written thirty years ago, it might have become an sf classic purely for its knowledgeable portrait of the space program. Nowadays, it's mimetic fiction, not speculative. I call that progress.

The New Hugo Winners Vol. IV edited by Gregory Benford (Baen) reliably assembles the '92-'94 winners, but you're mistaken if you think this is a collection of Connie Willis's short stories: only two of

the nine tales have her byline. Janet Kagan, Geoffrey Landis, and Lucius Shepard contribute other memorable winners.

Last year's World Fantasy Award ballot pointed out a novel I'd missed otherwise, a funky alternate history set in the Wild West, *Devil's Tower* by Mark Sumner. Buffalo Bill Cody saddles up now for the sequel, *Devil's Engine* (Del Rey), and it's good fun with lots of resonance to the tale of magic — "talents" — loose in the West.

From the West to the Far East: *Black Mist and Other Japanese Futures* (Daw), edited by Orson Scott Card and Keith Ferrell, is one of the better recent original anthologies. There are only five stories in the 300 pages here, so the writers (including Pat Cadigan and Richard A. Lupoff) don't have to cramp their styles. Four out of the five hit the mark for me.

Bodekker's Demons by Joe Clifford Faust (Bantam) is a scamp of a book, poking fun at the world of advertising by blending it with gangs of the future. Disregard the rumor claiming that the prequel, *Ferman's Devils*, detailed the doings of Mercury Press employees — those same gangsters show up here and any

coincidental resemblance to persons living or dead escaped me.

Michael Shea's *The Mines of Behemoth* (Baen) is the sort of fantasy adventure I rarely read nowadays — perhaps because people rarely write them as well as does Shea. He's a joy to read.

Carlucci's Heart by Richard Paul Russo (Ace) has a good *noir* taste to it without feeling overdone. The story of a nasty virus in the future feels a bit too long, but it's well worth reading for the twists at the end.

Tricia Sullivan's *Someone to Watch over Me* (Bantam Spectra) is another long one, a cyberpunk inquiry into identity that rages across Eastern Europe. Sullivan writes with the fluid grace of a natural storyteller and is rapidly developing into a first-rate novelist.

And if you do venture into the realm of hardcovers, *Pulp Art* by Robert Lesser (Gramercy Books) features great reproductions of classic work by Frank R. Paul, Virgil Finlay, and a few others. Detective pulps, war stories, jungle adventures and sf all get their due — you're likely to find the aviation illustrations as interesting as the sf pulp covers.

-GVG



There's a classic anecdote about the great Satchel Paige pitching a game that was about to be called on account of darkness. (That's right—there were no stadium lights in the 1940s and '50s.) The umpire was persuaded to let the game go one more inning, and Paige then proceeded to strike out the other side on ten pitches. When a teammate chided him about needing ten pitches, Paige remarked "The ump missed one."

Rick Wilber's father was catching in the big leagues back then (for the other St. Louis club), so it's no surprise that the spirit of an elder hurler should be the one to pass on an important lesson about sliders and fastballs and things in this tale.

Straight Changes

By Rick Wilber

IT IS THE TOP OF THE NINTH, and the Worden Pirates hold a one-run lead. This is along the lines of a miracle. Johnny O., on the bench between innings, reminded

the Pirates that they haven't won an opening game since, since, well, he can't remember. Certainly never in the ten years he's been catching.

Dan Carlow walks out to the mound, just shaking his head at the thought of it. Base hits, stolen bases, hit-and-runs, sacrifice flies — the Pirates have somehow managed them all and built up a 4-3 lead. Now all Dan has to do is hang onto it. This is not, of course, an easy thing for a weekend pitcher, who by rights should be home typing up his column for tomorrow's *Tribune*, not out here pretending he can still pitch, even at this humble level, a semi-pro senior men's league.

Dan takes a warm-up pitch, his arm so tired he isn't sure, as he goes into the wind-up, if he can even get the ball over the plate.

He lets it go, and sure enough the ball hits in front of the plate and skips by Johnny O., who gets up from his crouch to walk back to the screen

and get the ball. Watching him, Dan sees his dad in the stands, up in the top row behind home.

Of course it isn't Dad, can't be. It's just an old guy sitting there who looks a bit like him, that same old worn Cardinal cap, the same way he leans forward, elbows on knees, watching the game intently.

Dad died last summer, damn it, toward the end of the season. On a Sunday. The memories of that day come to Dan unbidden, like they always do, always there with him, ready to surface at any time. The car, the exhaust, the hose, the tape, the vomit in the lap — the cessation, the surrender.

Dan shakes his head to try and clear the memory of it. He still sees his dad in too many places, thinks of him too often.

Frank Carlow was a solid minor leaguer in the Cardinals' chain back in the late nineteen-thirties and pre-war forties, a real prospect. He was called up to the big club in September of '41, was on his way.

And then came Pearl Harbor and the war, so Frank's career plans changed and he became a weather observer, flying in bombers over Italy and the Balkans, nearly got killed but got put back together, fell in love with an American nurse and wound up married and back in St. Louis, that shattered left leg ending his playing days but not his love for the game.

So he turned to coaching, was good at it, wound up being a career minor league manager, helping the young kids with that dream to make it to the big leagues.

Two or three times he was rumored to be in line for a big league managing job, and every now and then he came up to coach for the big club. He earned a reputation as one of the good ones, a laborer in the fields of professional ball. But Frank never won a pennant, not a single one, in Tidewater or Denver or Spokane, or anywhere else — not a one.

And it ate at him, grew and enlarged over the years until it became the major frustration of his life. Until the cancer, that sure changed his perspective.

Dan stands on the mound, tired. He looks in toward the dugout and sees Jimmy, his son, in there arranging the bats in perfect order in the dirt, smallest to largest. Next to them, the helmets, set with the bills forward, are just so. Jimmy looks up, sees Dan, waves, yells something at him. Dan smiles. What a kid, what a terrific kid.

Dan takes another warm-up. The ball floats lazily in toward the plate, so fat it looks like slow-pitch softball. His arm feels dead. This is the first game of the season and he only planned to go four or five innings, but it turns out the Pirates only have nine players today and he's the only pitcher, so tired or not, he's on the mound.

What he needs, he thinks, is one of those mechanical arms the old pitching machines had, the ones where the metal arm just wound up tight on its spring and then let loose, flinging the ball in toward the plate.

Two days before, on a sultry Friday evening, Dan took Jimmy with him and drove away from Lakeland, taking the back roads north of I-4 past the strawberry fields and dairies and Florida scrub until he reached the east side of Tampa and the batting cages on Busch Boulevard.

It is tacky, touristy Florida there, a world away from the simple-minded complacency of Lakeland. Down the road a half mile is Busch Gardens and a park full of happy Ohioans and Michiganders looping the loop and buying trinkets and monorailing past the animals in their pocket Serengeti.

And there, just east of the thirty-nine dollar admission ticket that buys a day full of fun and a tour of the brewery, are the batting cages.

In the cages, for fifty cents, a machine pumps out ten fastballs and Dan can get into the groove, hit after hit, letting it all flow together. The zen of the swing. He has found some good, simple truths in those batting cages.

These machines are ancient, have been there for years, circling, stopping on their way to receive a ball from the basket and then whipping over the top to deliver the pitch, straight and hard, always at the same prescribed speed. Talk about your pitching mechanics, Dan thinks.

There is a primal fulfillment in those cages. No guessing, no waiting for the breaking ball, no doubts about life's little change-ups. Just straight balls, coming at you, and swing.

Dan likes the seventy-mile-an-hour machine best. It is fast enough to be a challenge but still hittable for him. The eighty is nearly impossible, and he can't imagine anyone hitting a ninety-mile-an-hour pitch.

It is good, as he loosens up to start the final inning, to think of those machines with their mechanical arms that never tire, never ache for the next four or five days.

Or never win a game either, he reminds himself. There are pluses to the pain. All it takes is a certain dedication, a certain commitment.

The batting cages were fun, Dan and Jimmy spending four or five dollars on the machines and then going out for pizza.

Jimmy, especially, had a wonderful time, swinging away at the slowest machine, now and then catching hold of one to rattle it around the enclosure. The kid flat-out loved it. Every time he hit one he did a little victory dance, almost getting plunked once or twice by the next pitch — Dan had to yell at him that the machines weren't going to wait for him to celebrate.

Flawed, wonderful Jimmy.

When Jimmy was born, twenty years ago, Dan was waiting outside the delivery room, the classic pacing father-to-be, when the doctor came out to "have a word with you about your son."

Down's syndrome, the doctor explained. Mentally retarded. "He'll never be normal, Mr. Carlow," the doctor said. "He'll always be slow."

The doctor recommended that they put the baby into an institution right away, said that would be best for everyone. But this was Dan's boy, his own first-born son, and so Dan said no, we'll keep him. Sally, in her hospital bed cuddling the baby, said she felt the same way.

A couple of years later she changed her mind. There was a lot of shouting, a lot of tears, a boyfriend. Dan got the house, the car, and Jimmy. Sally got her freedom.

Dan hears the echoes of those times as he watches the boy: He'll always be slow. And yeah, that is certainly the case, has been for these twenty years. But slow doesn't begin to explain Jimmy, or what he means to Dan.

The kid, you see, can see things clearly, see things honestly in this murky, gray old world. Dan loves the boy for that, for his innocence and honesty. He wishes he could find more of that essential goodness in himself, to tell the truth.

Just this morning Jimmy proved it again. He left a note for them, for Dan and his girlfriend Michelle. When Dan stumbled, groggy with sleep, into the kitchen and poured himself that first cup of coffee, Michelle was already up, reading the note, crying.

Dan wishes he loved Michelle. She is a terrific person, a caring lover, and seems to understand his limitations.

He ought to treat her better, be able to offer her more than he does. But marriage is certainly not on his list and doesn't seem to be on hers, either. She has her two past divorces, and he has Jimmy and the vicious scene he and the boy went through with Jimmy's mom when she screamed at the poor kid while Jimmy stood there, silent. She said she couldn't take it anymore, just couldn't damn handle it, and left. Even after all these years, Dan doesn't dare risk that again.

Last night, when Michelle made her little announcement, showed why.

The two of them were in the kitchen where Dan was rummaging around in a drawer looking for a corkscrew, when Michelle said "Danny?"

He didn't like the sound of that, and turned to look at her, saying nothing.

"Danny, I have to talk about something. About someone."

"Uh-oh," he said, and tried to smile. Damn. They both always knew that something like this might happen, had even talked about it over the years, about how their relationship was really fine, but, well, if the real thing came along for her ...

"Danny, I met this guy. He works over at the college, a professor."

"And?"

"And I like him. He's a good man. Divorced a few years back and looking to settle down. He's a little serious, maybe. But he's stable, and awfully nice."

"Awfully nice," Dan said.

"Yes," she said, firmly. "He's awfully nice. And he's a Christian. The real thing, born again and everything."

"You're joking, Michelle. Really?"

She laughed, "Well, yeah, he's a little odd about that, odd about a couple of things, actually."

"Odd?"

"But, Danny, I really like him. He's good to talk to, he doesn't just talk about sports all the time, he's..."

"Ouch," Dan said, and could only smile.

"But, yeah, he's a little odd. Like about sex. He really thinks we should wait, see how serious it gets, he says, before getting that involved. I think maybe he's thinking about marriage, and would want to wait for that, even." She shrugged. "It's a religious thing, you know?"

"I know," he said, picking up the wine and peeling back the metallic

cap before starting in with the corkscrew. "Well, hell, Michelle, I think that's great. I'm happy for you. He's luckier than he knows. He's very, very lucky. You're a wonderful woman."

She blushed, walked over to him. "Thank you, Dan. I knew you'd understand."

He poured her a glass of the wine. Now what?

"Well," he said, "here's to you and your new friend," and he raised his glass to clink it with hers.

She sipped, smiled, sipped again.

"You know," she said, "this does sort of change the equation of things for us a little."

"A little?" All he seemed to be able to do was phrase short questions. Damn.

"Yes, Danny. But only a little, really. Look, I'm just starting to get to know this guy. I just wanted you to know that, that's all, really. So there wouldn't be any surprises later, you know?"

"Later?"

"Oh, Danny. He's a really fine man, but he's so, so, well, cautious all the time, you know what I mean?"

He almost said "Cautious?" but held off, just looked at her instead.

"And I'm not quite ready for nothing but all that caution, Danny. Not quite ready, you understand? I mean, I want to keep dating him, see how it goes. But that doesn't mean..."

She walked over to him, leaned up and kissed him.

He understood.

They walked into the front living room. Michelle went over to the stack of CDs and picked a favorite, clicked it into the machine, turned to look at Dan.

He held out his arms so that she would come into them with a smile, and they started dancing to "Avalon," an old Roxy Music song.

As they danced Michelle slowly unbuckled his belt, pulled it from his pants, giggled as she threw it onto the couch. Then, slowly, while the song talked about seduction and momentary perfection, she undid his shirt buttons one by one, scratching his chest in between.

They made love for hours. Michelle wasn't on the pill, and didn't want to use the diaphragm and messy cream, so it was always up to Dan to hold

back, and the lack of climax seemed to keep him going damn near right through the night.

And she flowed so well along with him, just languidly, timelessly, rolling and deeply laughing and nibbling here and there and cuddling and cupping and then slowly rolling again.

Her skin. Jesus God he liked skin that smooth. And her thighs, her strong, supple thighs: they just did not let go for what seemed like hours — was hours. And the strange softness of her lips when she was half asleep. He leaned over her, kissed them, and then, finally, fell asleep.

THEN, IN THE MORNING, she was up early, trying to get herself dressed and organized before Jimmy — a late riser most days — woke up and came wandering in to check on Dad. Dan, waking up, heard her in the bathroom, and then heard the footsteps heading downstairs, to the kitchen, he guessed, to make some coffee.

Downstairs, when he got there, the coffee maker was bubbling away and Michelle sat over by the table, reading that letter.

"Look at this," she said, and held up a piece of paper from Dan's computer printer, the perforated holes still attached to it.

"For My Dad" it read across the top of the paper.

"What is this?" Dan said, and took it from her.

"It's from Jimmy. He must have done it last night while we were out. Take a look."

Jimmy was pretty good with the computer. Played some of the games, seemed to know his way around in it all right. Dan didn't know his son was writing with it, though.

Dan read the sheet, and then just shook his head and smiled.

"This probably took him an hour to write. Hell, he's something, isn't he?"

Michelle had tears in her eyes. She nodded. "He is that, Danny, he is that. He's really something."

Dan put the sheet back on the table. "I'll leave it here for him. You coming to the game this afternoon?"

"I don't know yet, Dan. Maybe," Michelle said, pouring a cupful of coffee. "Can I take the coffee with me?"

"Sure. Gotta go right now!"

"I think so. Yes. I do, I have to go now."

She stood, leaned over to kiss him, smiled and left. He was sipping on his coffee, looking over the headlines on the front page of the *Tribune*, when he heard her car start up.

A few minutes later Jimmy came down, rubbing his eyes, grinning, ready for breakfast. Dan gave his son a good-morning hug and got started on the eggs and hash browns.

Jimmy, sipping on his own cup of coffee, said "Big day today, Dad, right? New season."

"Right, Jimmy. Pirates are going all the way this year. All the way. Championship. Betcha a hundred dollars."

"You on, Dad. Hundred dollars," Jimmy said. And then he laughed, getting the joke.

The letter went like this:

Jimmy Carlow
Lakeland Florida

This is: My letter to my dad

Hello my Dad,

I like you. This will be fun for me.

I like it typing, and I like writing like you, like my Dad. You are a good man. Your name is Dan Carlow. I am Jimmy. Your best son.

Grandpa says hello to you, My dad. I see him sometimes. Grandpa says I be proud of you, and of me, too!

I work hard at McDonald's. I clean it the lobby and I make buns and, sometimes, I make it the fries, too. I like it. A lot!

You work at it the newspaper. You write three (one, two, three) collums a weak. You are famous and a good pitcher too. I am proud of You, and You are Proud of me, two.

I be batboy for Worden Pirates! I keep it the bats just right. And the helmets. This is hard work, and I like it. A lot! My dad is pitcher for Pirates for many years. I be batboy for many years. We are a team. We have fun. We try hard.

I keep it my own room in our house. It is clean. I am cooking now too for my dad. Hot dogs and pot pies too.

My dad's girl friend is michelle. She is nice girl. I like her. a lot. We go for drives in her fast car on sometimes. She likes to smile. I like her. A lot!

This week, on Friday, I visit Group Home. people there say I could live in Group Home. I could to. I would love it there., And be an adult.

I love my Dad.

(I spell check this like my dad shows me. It works grate!)

Jimmy Carlow
Lakeland Florida

A few weeks ago Dan got a call from the local agency. They had a place lined up where Jimmy could go and live pretty much on his own, a group home they called it. The agency people thought Jimmy could actually handle that, could live in his own little apartment in this special complex, a place where he'd have someone to help out when he needed it — a "coach" they called it. Otherwise, Jimmy would be expected to make it on his own.

Dan has his doubts.

Jimmy is such a kid in so many ways. Dan has spent twenty years watching this boy's halting growth, encouraging him, guiding him, protecting him. Dan doesn't know if he is ready to see Jimmy have to face this mean old world on his own.

At the batting cages, Jimmy really tagged the machine's last pitch,

sending a line drive up the middle and banging it hard off the back of the cage. Jimmy laughed and danced around, yelling about home runs and world series and winning. Dan laughed with him and then, tired of knocking the balls around the screened-in cage, he talked Jimmy into quitting and they headed for CDB's and some pizza.

WHEN DAN WAS A KID his dad took him to those same cages, and they weren't even screened in back in the sixties, they didn't have any limit on how far you could hit the ball. You could watch it soar into the night sky if you really caught hold of one, watch it land and roll out onto the golf driving range that used to be there.

The driving range is an apartment complex now, OakHaven Village, one of those stucco-walled complexes that cater to Tampa's wannabes — the ones who still believe in the entrepreneurial dreamland that Florida bills itself as.

His dad took him there once a week that one long glorious summer when Danny was ten. The two of them would swing away, twenty pitches for a dime, until they were good and tired. Then came Dairy Queen and root beer floats on the way home.

It was always a good time, getting away from Mom and her crazies and the fights she had with Dad and the screaming and even the shattering crash of the emptied glasses. Wonderful times. Poor Dad, putting up with that for all those years before Mom finally left and went West.

And now Dan is facing the forty mark and the batting cages are fenced in tight all the way around. And Dad is gone, and Mom is still crazy out in California somewhere, still puttering around with her sculpture and her poetry and drinking her carrot juice in the morning and her wine — "It's just wine, that's all, just a few glasses of wine" — all night. He wonders when he might hear from her again, get another of those strange, rambling middle-of-the-night phone calls. It's been a long time.

It's time to get serious. Dan looks down at the first hitter of the inning, a chubby boy who doesn't have much power but got the bat on the ball last time up. John gives the signal, one finger down toward the dirt, fastball. Dan goes into his wind-up.

And it feels good, stride and release, machine-like for the moment, the ball dipping a bit at the end. A nice sinker, strike one as the boy watches it go by.

The balls in the batting cages, the ones from those pitching machines, never sink, never tire, never change. Dependable, trustworthy — as long as the metal arm keeps whipping over the top and then lets it go, strike, strike, strike.

Dan lets another one go, a fastball sinker. The chubby kid swings and chops it into the dirt foul, strike two.

Dan takes a deep breath, feeling okay for the moment. He glances at the dugout, can see Jimmy in there, sitting over at the end of the bench, having one of those conversations with himself that he's been having lately, chatting up a storm, gesturing, laughing, talking to himself. Dan asked him about it the other day, about who he's talking to. Jimmy said it was Grandpa. Dan smiled, ruffled the boy's hair, gave him a hug.

Frank had loved the kid, doted on him, coached him in playing basketball and baseball, tried to help the boy with his pitching, just seeing if he could teach Jimmy to throw a strike, just one, all the way from the mound to home.

"That kid tries so damn hard," he told Dan once, shaking his head. "If I'd had a few more like him, trying that hard, I'd have won a dozen goddamn pennants."

Dan had laughed. Now, on the mound, Dan remembers how Frank had coached him, too, worked on his fastball, his slider, his straight-change, the one that looked like a fastball but came in so much slower.

That was the secret with the straight change, the way it looked like it was going to be one thing but turned out to be something else entirely. It worked because it was different. It always seemed risky to Dan, so fat as it floated up there.

But Frank loved it, he always said, because "It's a fooler, that change-up. You use it right, when they don't expect it, and you'll get some strike-outs with it, son. Guaranteed. You just have to know when's the right time for it."

On the other hand, Dad hated the sinker, Danny's favorite pitch. He cursed it for its unreliability.

"Son," he asked him once after a Pirates' game, "how can you like

using any damn pitch that gets better as you get more tired? Hell, you can't trust the damn thing. Sometimes it sinks, sometimes it doesn't. You're lucky the hitters in this league are so terrible."

Dan remembers laughing at that. They lost that game by five or six runs, including a couple of sinkers that flattened out and turned into home runs. Oh, well. Hard to argue with the old guy sometimes.

Thing is, Dan likes the sinker, maybe because of its unpredictability. It's a little like a knuckle ball in that way. Could be great, could be awful. Like life.

He throws another sinker in and the chubby kid goes for it, swinging weakly but topping it so it trickles out toward the mound. Dan comes off the mound, grabs it cleanly with his bare right hand, and turns to throw it to Tommy at first. But his arm, his shoulder, can't handle this new movement, throwing from a different position, and the ball sails high on him, riding over Tommy's outstretched glove and out into the open field past the stands in short right.

Stevie, out in right, has to run like the devil to go get it and hold the runner to second.

Terrific, thinks Dan. Instead of an easy out I put the tying run in scoring position. Just super.

He tries to bear down, wants to concentrate. But the oppressive heat has taken a toll, certainly, and the truth of the matter is he's so tired that he feels sort of disconnected from the game. He walks the next guy on four pitches.

Dan stands on the mound, hands on his hips, glove folded back, and tries not to show how tired he is. Damn, any other team in the universe would have a reliever in by now, but this is the Worden Pirates, and there is no reliever, no bench. Just the nine of them today, and none of the others can pitch.

Hell. Dan walks back off the mound and tries to gather himself together. Just get the ball over the plate, he says to himself, and hope for the best. Don't worry about the arm, don't think about it. Just no more walks, at least be sure of that. No more walks, nothing for free.

He gets back onto the mound, kicks a little dirt into the hole in front of the rubber so he'll have a better footing, and then goes into the stretch. Jesus, his arm feels dead.

He lets the pitch go, a sinker right down the middle. Dan doesn't have much stuff on the ball, he is far too tired for that and the ball stays up flat and fat, never does sink. But the hitter, expecting a breaking ball, gets caught with the bat on his shoulder and watches the fat thing float by for strike one.

"Got away with that one, Danny. Got lucky," says a voice from behind the mound. Dan, taking the throw back from Johnny O., turns to see who said it but there is no one there. Weird.

"Look, you don't have enough stuff to make that sinker work anymore, Danny, and you know it."

Damn. Sounds like Dad, that raspy voice that almost whispered toward the end.

"Yeah, Danny, it's me, sure enough," says the voice.

By god, it is his dad. What the hell?

There is a chuckle. "I don't know. Beats me, too, son. But here I am."

Dan comes off the mound, confused, dizzy with the heat and this hallucination. A stroke? A fainting spell? Heat prostration?

"Nah, son, none of that," his dad says. "Just old Frank Carlow, back for a little game of ball with his son Danny, that's all. It's just me."

"Dad?"

"Oh, Christ, kid, don't say anything out loud like that. They'll think you're nuts," his dad says. "Look, just get back up there, get into the stretch, and let's get you out of this inning, okay? I'll explain everything later."

"Dad?" he says again. "What the hell?"

But the voice, the hallucination or whatever it is, is right. Best to just ignore it and get back on the mound. He could go see Doctor Pat tomorrow, get a check-up, see if it is some sort of heat thing. Pat is a friend, and will be honest with him. Christ. Voices. Just what he needs.

Dan goes into the stretch, takes a look at the runners at second and first, and then peers in for the sign from Johnny O. One finger stabs down at the dirt. Another fastball sinker.

"Won't work," his dad's voice says. "Shake it off, son. I'd try a slider, and keep it away from him. He'll chase it."

Oh, god. Dan backs off the rubber, stands still for a moment, tries to clear his head. He wipes his forehead with his sleeve, the sweat pouring

off him, puts his cap back on. He looks in to see John, still calling for that sinker. Dan says no to that with a slight shake of the head.

Johnny tries again, two fingers, a curve. Dan shakes that off, too.

Johnny stands, calls time, and trots out to the mound.

"What's the matter?"

"What's the matter?" Dan repeats. "Jesus, Johnny, I'm next to dead out here and you're calling for fastballs. I just don't have them in me."

"You want to bring Ricky in from right to pitch? He doesn't have much, but he can get it over."

Dan waves his glove at Johnny. "No, no. I'll manage, but let's try the slider on this guy. I think he might go for one low and away. All right?"

"Sure. No problem," Johnny says, and clanks back down to the plate, crouches behind it.

Dan goes into the stretch, takes a look at the two runners, and comes in with the slider. It's the first one he's thrown in a while, and, surprisingly, it feels good, is, in fact, damn near perfect, starting off waist high and down the middle and then breaking away, out of the strike zone wide and low.

And the batter goes for it, starting his swing, realizing his mistake and trying to stop it, but too late. Strike two.

"I'll be damned," Dan says aloud, "it worked. Hell, let's go for it one more time, okay?"

"No," says Dad's voice. "I got a better idea. This kid'll be protecting the plate now. With two strikes on him he'll be looking for that slider or your fastball. Let's try the straight change."

Dan just shakes his head. Of course, the change-up. But what the hell, at least it's easy to throw. He steps back onto the mound, shakes off the signs from John until he gets the change, and lets it go. The kid is way early on it, almost falling over trying to stop his swing, missing badly. Strike three. One out.

His dad's voice sounds pleased. "I knew it," he says, as the ball comes back to Dan.

Dan steps back down off the mound, tucks his glove under his arm and rubs the ball for a minute, stalling for a little rest time and hoping to get through whatever it is that brought on this damn voice.

"It's not the heat, Danny. Honest. It's me. Man, it's good to be here,

good to talk to you. Jimmy's a great kid, but it's hard to hold a real conversation with him, you know."

And damned if Dan can't almost see the old man standing there behind the mound — that battered old red Cardinal cap perched on his head, that crooked smile that rose more on the left side of his face, that pot-belly gut.

No one else seems to notice, and the old man is barely there, even for Dan. It might be, Dan thinks, just a worsening of the heat prostration or something.

Dan looks to the stands to see if the guy he saw before is still there. The guy is gone.

The apparition shakes its head, says, "Face it, Danny. It's me, and you know it. Didn't Jimmy tell you about this? He said he would. Hell, I think that kid's the reason I'm back, Danny. He told me you guys needed me out here. So, let's get this next guy, all right?"

And they do, on four pitches, a fastball inside, two sliders low and away, and another change-up. Strikeout. There is an actual burst of applause from the stands, some encouraging yells. The locals aren't used to seeing this sort of thing, but they sure do like it.

"You know," says his dad, firming up a little with each pitch, getting clearer and clearer for Dan, "this is kind of fun, Danny. Maybe this is why I came back, to do a little coaching."

"I don't think so, Dad. I don't think you're back at all. But if you are, it isn't to tell me what kind of pitch to throw."

Fletch comes trotting in from third base, concerned perhaps about his pitcher talking to himself. "Jesus, it's hot," he says, wiping the sweat from his face. "You okay, Dan?"

Dan just smiles. "Fine, Fletch. Just fine. Let's end this thing, okay?"

And three pitches later, he does, following Dad's instructions he gets the next hitter to hit a one-hopper to Fletch, who steps on the bag at third to end the game.

Pirates win, 4-3. Amazing.

Dan walks slowly off the mound. He can hardly lift his arm to grasp Johnny O.'s hand as his catcher trots out to congratulate him, but it's a win, by god. For the Pirates.

There is a little knot of happy players who walk in together to the

bench. None of them seem to notice the wispy image of his Dad still standing out on the mound, looking happily in toward the plate. Dan, looking back once or twice, doesn't know quite whether to laugh or cry. Has this been real somehow? Will a cold cup of water make it all fade away?

He doesn't know, but Frank sure looks happy out there.

Jimmy runs up to give his dad a hug. "You a winner, my dad. Nice job. Great pitching. I be very proud of you."

"Thanks, Jimbo," Dan says, and concentrates to bring his arm up, put it around the boy as they walk in toward the bench and some water. "We finally won one, didn't we?"

"And Dad," says Jimmy, "I not tell anyone about Grandpa, right? He told me to keep it a secret, except to tell you."

"What?"

Jimmy leans over to speak conspiratorially. "Grandpa says we keep this all a secret, right? Tell no one."

Dan just smiles. Right. Tell no one.

He gives the boy a hug. "That's right, Jimmy. It's a secret, it's our little secret, okay?"

"Okay, my dad. It is a secret."

Dan sits on the bench, reaches over with his left hand to push in the button on the cooler to get some cold water, and drinks a cupful down in gulps.

"You won?"

He turns. It's Michelle, smiling.

"I thought I'd stop by and commiserate after your weekly loss, maybe take you and Jimmy out for a bite to eat," she says. "And now I find out that you won. How in God's name did that happen?"

She looks terrific. She looks wonderful.

Dan stands, laughing. "Beats me," he says. "But eating sounds good, a little victory burger maybe, okay?"

And the three of them walk over to Michelle's Pathfinder, climb into it. Dan is glad that she's driving. Maybe, by the time they've eaten and she's brought them back here to pick up his car, his tired old arm will work well enough that he'll be able to shift gears and steer with it. Maybe.

She's backing out of her space when Jimmy, in the back, rolls down his window and leans out to wave back toward the diamond.

"What's he doing?" Michelle asks.

Dan looks. There's nothing out there that he can see. But Jimmy, he thinks, is the one who sees things clearly.

"It is nothing, 'Shelley,'" Jimmy says. "Just nothing at all."

And then he leans over the back of the seat and whispers into his father's ear, "Grandpa says bye, my dad. We see him next week. We win them all this year, he says. We win the pennant."

And Michelle looks over at them with a quizzical smile, wondering what's going on.

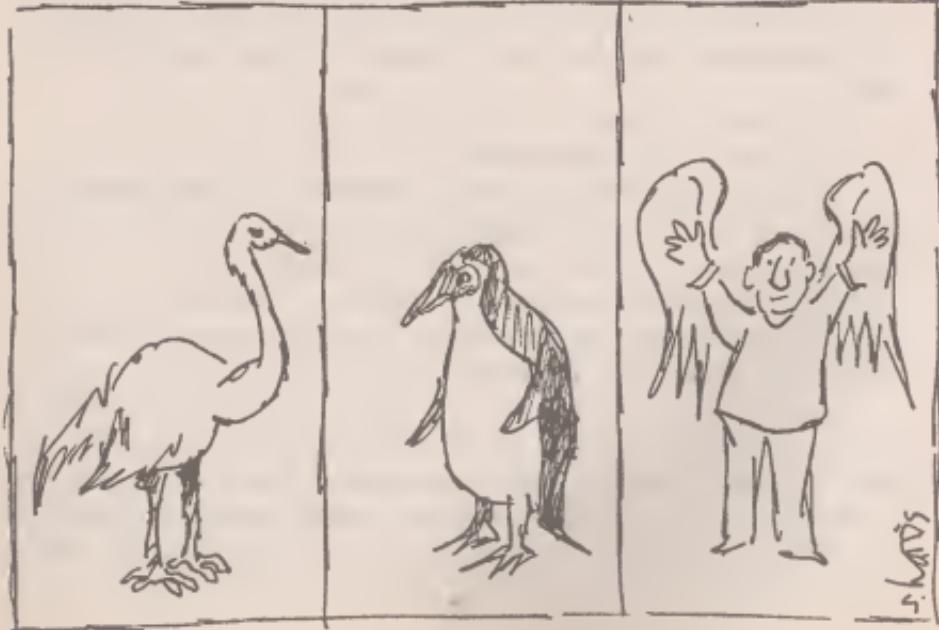
"Later," Dan tells her, and chuckles. "I'll try and explain it all to you later."

"Explain about what?"

Good question. "About the game. About winning. About Jimmy," he says. And then he looks at her. She seems different somehow today. He can't quite put his finger on it, but she's, she's ...

He gives up, smiles, and adds, "And mostly, I guess, about straight changes." 

FLIGHTLESS BIRDS



Jacquelyn Hooper received a masters degree from Arizona State University and now lives in Cerritos, California. She attended the Clarion writers' workshop in 1993 and notes that this story grew out of an inquiry into the different ways in which fantasy and SF view the future. Just as many stories set in the far future occur on planets named for ancient gods, she thought, so too do we all individually need to understand our own pasts in order to make sense of the future. Witness Chris Havenport's case.

Home on the Range

By Jacquelyn Hooper

LN THE SECOND HOUR OF waiting in the rain for something to happen, Chris Havenport moved his leg.

"Be still," Paladin said.

Chris stared at him. Water dripped from Paladin's wide-brimmed hat, and ran down his arms. His hands were clasped around the trigger of the rocket net, ready to fire.

He stared straight ahead, through a break in the trees, at the clearing.

"I have to take a piss," Chris said.

"Hold it."

"Nothin's out there."

Paladin remained rigid. Chris carefully returned his leg to its previous position, cursing Paladin in his head. Waiting was not the worst part of extermination, but it was a close second. Paladin blackened his eye once for coughing in a still glen, but even then Chris did not see the point. They weren't after quail or hare.

There was no name yet for what they were after. Paladin called them hellion and butchers; Chris had liked the sound of natives. Either way, who knew if they could see them hiding in the bushes?

Paladin moved his head, alerting Chris to something to his right. Chris saw nothing but leaves, and the blinking red light of the atmostat in the clearing.

But he felt a shift in the weather. Thunder drummed above him, and the air, once filled with the sharp smell of leaves and his own musty wetness, was a river, flooding his nose and ears. He suppressed the urge to cough, because Paladin was not moving. He stood, seemingly rooted, his dark eyes piercing through the curtain of water before them.

In the clearing, a woman appeared. She was naked, her skin the color of teak. She spun around, a blissful expression on her wide face as the storm swirled with her. She slowed, and the rain seemed to slow.

Chris watched her dance, following the way her black hair roped and swung across her face and shoulders.

He did not know what possessed him, at that moment, to rise, to see better.

She reminded him of Rae, their custodian. They shared the same coffee shading, the same dark hair. He thought of Rae's smile as the woman halted her dance, her arms stretched to the sky, her body poised to leap across the clearing.

Her sudden stop startled Chris from his dreams. The woman turned her head, her ears pricked like a fox's. Her gold eyes found him in the clearing.

Her actions reminded Chris of a deer's. For all intents and purposes, she was one. What he thought was skin was fur. Her half raised leg tapered down to a hoof.

Chris wanted to turn from her wondering, almost inviting expression. He felt his heart slow.

A sigh behind him made him jump. Not until the woman turned her head did he realize Paladin had fired the net rocket.

"The stakes," Paladin said, rushing through the brush. The net had dropped on the woman, knocking her to the ground. Chris opened the tool box a few centimeters away. The iron stakes sat in their own tray, slick and rusty from the rain. He took them and a mallet, and ran into the clearing.

Paladin was sitting on the native. She appeared stunned, until she saw Chris. She tried to tear at the mesh netting with her hands. She hit and shoved at Paladin. Paladin punched her in the face.

"Switch," Paladin said, when Chris stopped next to him. "Now!"

He jumped, and Chris took his place. The woman struggled anew, and Chris held her arms down.

Paladin stepped on one of her outstretched wrists, and knelt down. He took one of the stakes, and with one swing hammered it through her hand, into the mud.

"Nye!" she screamed. Chris grabbed her other arm, and felt her kick and buck beneath him as Paladin circled around them. Chris worked by feel, by practice in pressing her down, keeping her still. He could not look at her face, not with the human ones. He wished he could shut out their noises as well.

"Josen, dis maen," she said, her voice a harsh whisper. "Etnis dole capo ... nye!"

"Last one," Paladin said. "Move."

"Help me."

Chris opened his eyes. Tears and rain streaked her face.

"Christopher, please."

"Move! Move!" Paladin shoved him aside. Chris lay on his side, stunned. Natives didn't speak anything anyone could understand. It was always gibberish, the sound of birds, cats, and shrieking metal singing together.

Never soft toned American. Never names.

She closed her eyes. "Please."

Paladin brought down the mallet on the final stake, over her heart. Her body twitched, then stilled.

"Call it in." He tossed the mallet in the grass in front of Chris. "Tell Rae it's red light."

"She — "

"It's dead." He wiped his hands on his jacket, turning the wet leather a richer brown.

Chris stood up, and walked toward the equipment. He hated this. He always had, always would.

As he called Rae, the sky darkened, and the rain turned to hail.

"Put it away careful," Paladin said, a half hour later. "It's mine, not New River's."

Chris rolled the net and slipped it into the mouth of the launcher. "Sorry."

Paladin removed his hat, shook water from the brim, and put it back on. "What's passin' your back?"

"She said my name." He removed the legs from the launcher.

"So what? You know how many people on this planet named Chris? Light a rocket and everyone's looking for the Second Coming." He approached Chris, and took the launcher legs from his hands. "I gave you rules. Follow 'em before I put you with them other idiots in Exterminator's Row."

He glared at Paladin's back. Exterminator's Row was a monument created by the New River Expedition Company dedicated to the exterminators who died on Cynataka since its colonization. Paladin had taken Chris there after buying him from the New Bethlehem orphanage. He wanted Chris to see his predecessors, all orphans sold to trade, all killed in the field less than two years after Paladin purchased them.

Chris wondered if they were the lucky ones. He had been stuck with Paladin's cold, brooding abuse for six years.

He would still be stuck, unless the Air Corps nabbed him. God, how he wanted to be a pilot. To fly across the river, to fly through space and time.

To fly the hell away from his current life.

He walked away from the clearing and toward their gear as Paladin prepared to turn the native to ash, negating its very existence. He did not care what Paladin said. Killing this one was not like killing the hare and antelope hybrids, or the things with lion's paws and eagle's wings. She called his name. Looking in her eyes, he felt as if he were under a spotlight. She wanted him to perform.

And he failed. Whatever she expected, he did not do. He could not shake the feeling he was wrong in not taking any sort of action.

Rae arrived as Chris sat near the gear, blowing on his hands to warm them. The New River Expedition Company was a maverick operation. When Cynataka had been discovered, New River capitalized on the

chance to offer homestead packages, trouble free attempts at life on a real new frontier. They had moved in quickly on the Army's tail, using atmospheric sensors — Rae nicknamed them atmostats — to secure and define their claim even as the military destroyed the indigenous plant and animal life.

He and Paladin kept the territory clear, killing anything the army missed. Rae was their custodian; she cleaned up what the natives destroyed before the homesteaders arrived.

She also carried supplies and extra gear, even though Paladin never let him use most of it. Guns, rifles, knives and arrows did the job, Paladin said. The rest just got New River good copy.

Rae parked her bike alongside the extermination supplies, blowing hot air and slush around as the motors shut down. She was six feet tall, dressed in orange overalls and wet from speeding through the rain. She grabbed a coat from her bike and tossed it to Chris.

"What's the kill?" she asked.

"A woman. With fur." He stood up, and put on the jacket. It was her favorite, the black one with her old army squadron nickname, Anansi, and a spider on the back. "And hooves."

"Still there?"

Chris nodded. Rae opened a compartment on the bike, and pulled out a camera. She ran through the brush, sidestepping branches so quickly she made little noise. Chris followed, even as he heard the whine of Paladin's laser eradicator in action. His nose, tender from the rain, twitched at the scent of burning flesh and fur.

Rae moved through the trees, stomping through the mud. "He did it again!"

"He likes to get done."

"Forget done. He knew I wanted a picture."

"What for?"

"You never wondered what happens to the gods when they die?"

"They ain't gods." He tightened the coat around him "Anyway, who gives a damn? Picture's not gonna bring 'em back."

She lifted a strand of her hair from her face. "What's wrong with you?"

"Paladin." He kicked at the ground. "I'm sorry."

"So make it up to me." She brushed her camera free of water with her fingers. "How's your memory?"

"Too good."

"I want an image. Talk me through a drawing on the radio later, okay?"

"Rae!" It was Paladin. "Fix this box so we can get the hell out of here."

She looked at Chris. He smiled, and leaned against the nearest tree. He and Rae were raised in the same orphanage in New Bethlehem, seven hundred kilometers east and six years away from the wilds of the New River Territory.

Before Paladin had bought Chris, then sixteen, from New Bethlehem, Rae was his girl. Running into her on this assignment, it had almost been as if they'd never been parted.

Or it would be, if they were ever allowed more than five seconds together. Stares and a few words were all Paladin would allow them.

"Rae!" Paladin yelled.

"Kleenex," she said, and turned around.

"What?" Chris asked.

"In the top pocket." Rae stomped toward the cycles. "Your nose is running."

"Circuit board malfunction," Rae said an hour later. She tightened the lid of the atmostat. "Like they had back at W Station. Native comes in, sticks a magnet under the box. Erases the program, shuts the shields down." She picked up her radio. "Sayles at x-ray station, code zero two zero two charlie. Activate."

The red light turned green. Moments later, the clearing was filled with the sound of crickets and cicadas, New River's way of verifying that the equipment was on, while maintaining an Earthlike feel.

Or it would be, Chris thought. If Cynataka had crickets and cicadas.

Paladin looked up from where he had set down their weapons for maintenance. "It didn't have a magnet."

"Maybe she was the magnet." The weapons sat in a row on a tarp. Rae walked over to them, and began examining the rifle. "Maybe she was one of those things Ev's always nagging about on the radio, those things that killed Harris and Teagarden — "

"Gremlins."

"Yeah." She raised the rifle, aimed it at a tree heavy with apples, and fired. Three apples exploded, raining pulp sized pieces to the ground. "But Havenport says this was a woman with fur."

"It don't matter what it was. It's dead." Paladin took his rifle, and handed her a shotgun.

"It could've been Melinda Cordisian," Rae said. She began to strip the gun. "Settlers reported her missing two days ago. Ev thinks she got Convert's Disease."

Chris had heard of Melinda Cordisian. She had been a scientist on the first strike team that landed on Cynataka. Paladin had known her from his army days on Earth. She was matter of fact, he'd said. A woman who knew her place in the world, not like most of them nowadays.

He wondered how she could have come down with Convert's Disease. It was said to hit colonists, mostly. People who went beyond the protection of New River into the uncontrolled regions of the planet. They breathed the unpurified air, tasted the untreated water, ate food they had grown in the alien soil. Not soon after, they became natives.

Melinda Cordisian had been among the first to discover the disease, and the natives, when the planet was first maintained by the military, so she was not stupid. But, like the others with Convert's, she made exterminating all the harder. Things were bad enough without having to hunt your own kind as well as the enemy.

"You've been personalizing the weaponry again," Rae said, staring at the pieces of the shotgun. She picked up the barrel, looked through it. "What the hell is in here?"

Paladin snatched it from her hands. "Clean the rest."

"That's New River equipment." She snapped a picture of it with her camera. "You've just bought that antique. Comes out of your pay."

"Fine." He gave her another barrel. "And prime it right, this time. Damn near tore my shoulder out in the recoil."

"Serves you right for using this old crap."

"But it don't hurt your aim any, does it?"

Paladin stared at her, his eyes narrowed to thin slits. Rae returned the stare. Her mouth was twisted into something not quite a smile, not quite a leer.

"I'm tired of your smart mouth." Paladin cradled his altered barrel under his arm, then walked through the trees. "I'm calling Ev."

"Like hell you are."

When he was sure Paladin had gone, Chris walked over to Rae. She was putting the shotgun back together with the new barrel. He watched her, standing as close to her as he could without getting in her way. She had a weirdly intoxicating smell, a combination of musk, electricity and gun oil.

She finished the gun, and turned toward him. "You know better."

"Do I?" He took the shotgun, and laid it against her workstand. He put his hands on her hips.

"He'll be right back. Ev lets him squeal, then reminds him of my service record." She moved close to him, blowing lightly in his ear. "That man hates that I know what I'm doing."

"You got a long record. That'll count for some time."

They kissed. Chris had always managed to move their relationship along, stealing the seconds they had together and making them count. It was painstaking work that required all his concentration to set up. Sleeping with Rae would not mean ending weeks of frustration on the New River Territory job.

It would be the end of years of frustration. Paladin had bought him as a virgin. To do the job right, he'd said, he had to stay that way. Natives ate up purity like you wouldn't believe.

The sound of crickets in the clearing became dead silence.

Chris and Rae parted from their embrace. Paladin was standing calmly next to the control box, drinking from a flask in one hand, and rubbing a chunk of magnetized metal over the atmostat with another.

Chris sighed. "I'm sorry. Next stop?"

"Maybe." She picked up the shotgun, aimed, and fired it above Paladin's head. Shot broke tree branches, bringing a rain of water and leaves down on Paladin and the control box.

"Are you out of your mind?" Paladin asked. He brushed himself free of rain and twigs.

"You're an asshole," she said, giving the shotgun to Chris. Then she left the clearing.

"The hellion want women," Paladin said. He put the flask in his pocket, lifted the shotgun. He aimed it at Chris, before aiming it toward

the trees. "Tune to their emotions. Don't matter how much sniper and covert duty they pull."

THREE DAYS LATER, Chris lay hidden in a field of grain, dressed in gold and bone-colored fatigues. His skin itched from the grasses and mites that had gotten into his clothing. The air was hot and dry. He thought he would choke from the overpowering stench of wheat, and the chemically treated manure that kept it growing.

Paladin was a few meters away, or a few millimeters away. Chris didn't know. He had not heard him on his earplug in over an hour.

I'm moving, he thought, but remained still.

His chest itched the most. He thought about the scar there, from the heart surgeries he had as a child to repair defective valves. He used to wish he could scratch it away; the Air Corps would not accept anyone with heart defects. Without the scar, he could have been signed up, like Rae, out in space, out anywhere but here.

He was meant to fly. He knew it every time he woke in the morning, staring at the new sky.

And reminded himself of it, when he woke from nightmares where the sky was Paladin's face, and he stood over him, an atmostat-shaped stake and mallet in hand.

Son of a bitch, he thought, closing his eyes. He remembered the man's first reaction to Rae. Ev the dispatcher had finally given them a dream partnership. She was never late, always ready with the right equipment for the next stretch of the job. New River hired her the moment she was honorably discharged, and paid her as much as they paid Paladin, whose price was sky.

She did know her job. She knew Paladin's job. No matter what weapon she held, she never missed what she aimed at. She told him once how she planned to settle in the Aurora Borealis Territory, across New River's river, when the territory was cleared. She wanted to work there as ranger.

So if she knew her job, maybe he didn't hate her, Chris thought. Maybe he wanted her. He had never seen Paladin with a woman, though women approached him. They would whither away under his stare, like roses in the cross beam of a laser eradicator.

Rae did not whither. And Chris knew that Paladin was technically a

widower. He had been a farmer on another Cynataka colony before natives massacred his family and carried off his wife, or she ran off, one or the other.

If he had married before, then he had liked women once. Who was to say he could not do it again?

Me, Chris thought. He touches her, I'll kill him.

"Corner of the sky, southwest," Paladin said. His voice was supposed to be a whisper, but it was a sonic boom in Chris's ear.

Chris adjusted the microphone bar under his chin so it was below his mouth. "What is it?"

"Coming in, three and three. Ready the rifle, stay low."

Chris glanced up at the light blue sky. The sun was alone: no clouds, no satellites, no ships. Virgin blue, the pilots called it. Like the surface of the ocean, there was nothing to see.

But the wind changed. Hot dust and grain shafts blew into Chris's face. He could hear the sound of shrieks. Metal twisting in the wind, the coming of a tornado, or dust storm.

These shrieks were harmonious, and coming from the direction Paladin had noted before, corner of the sky, southwest.

The natives had wings. Their bodies were covered with fine feathers, instead of hair. Tear-shaped eyes, dull and flat like pressed gold, scanned the grain for movement. Reddish-blond hair was atop their heads. Their faces were dreamily beautiful, almost lethargic in expression and movement.

They landed in the field, five in all, squatting before standing semi-erect. Two stood next to the damaged atmostat post. Hands with sharp talons picked at the twisted wires.

One chirped to the other four. Two removed jagged strips of sheet metal from their backs. The other two removed large shoulder sacks. They began to harvest the grain.

Chris noted the metal, the sacks. They were cheap materials, the type used by homesteaders who did not know any better. The natives were hacking at the grain, chopping stalks and shafts. They had no idea what they were doing, either.

They just know we eat it, Chris thought. He wondered how they'd gotten the materials. Stolen, after some observation, most likely. Some-

one was going to have to pay the New River Territory Emporium too much money to get them replaced.

Except, as he watched, the natives got better. The experimental swings were building a rhythm. The shrieks were replaced with pure notes, singing along with the tempo of the cuts.

"Now," Paladin said.

Chris took the rifle in his hands, marked a target with the sight, put his finger on the trigger. He had used the rifle only when helping Rae test it after it had been cleaned. He had not liked the feel of it then. He hated the feel of it now.

It was not that he hated guns. He had bought himself a Portland Pocket Laser .64 with his first paycheck. Laser fire was quick, effortless. You did not have to think to use it.

The rifle required thought. Chris had worked with Paladin long enough to know what happened when you thought wrong. A native would be wounded, but it would not be dead. Once it healed, it would come back stronger, wiser.

Emphasis on wiser. The longer the attack, the quicker they learned, the more they knew about you, about New River. About everything.

Paladin's shotgun brought the sound of thunder to the field. Part of a native's' wing was torn clean away.

"Now!" Paladin said.

Chris pulled the trigger. The rifle had been aimed at the smallest of the natives. It turned its head as the bullet left the chamber. He watched the native's reaction as the bullet flew past its head.

It put a hand to its ear, and screamed. It turned in Chris's direction, its flat eyes searching.

The one with the torn wing pulled the small one down into the field. The rest flew into the air, shedding feathers in their wake.

Paladin fired at the flock. He killed one with his first shot, the bullet going through its chest. It fell to the ground, disappearing in the sea of grain. He grazed another in the leg. It continued to fly.

"Chris," Paladin said, hissing into the earplug.

He raised the rifle, aimed. The sound of shifting grass made him pause. He lowered the rifle, and listened.

"Kill it."

"The other two," Chris asked. "Where are they?"

"Get the straggler!"

Chris did. He shot it clean in the chest. It lingered in the air, casting a tortured shadow across the grain field. It beat its wings once, then tumbled from the sky.

Chris stood when it hit the ground. There had always been a cold, hard feeling in his gut when he wounded natives. Everything for him went numb, and bitter in his mouth. He had never actually killed one, not the way Paladin did, though he tried.

A maddening desire overcame him to save it. Score the wound. Heal it.

A pair of gold eyes appeared from the grain in the midst of Chris's view. The smaller native was staring at him. It still held its hand to its ear, but now it was calm, its perfect mouth open in a small "o."

Chris heard the wind, the sound of flapping wings above him. The remaining natives were circling the field, watching like vultures.

Sweat ran down his neck and back. Something bit him. Another itch he could not scratch.

The native took its hand from its head. Blood stained the white feathers on its hand. It chirped once, a question.

Get down, he told himself. It was a trap. He did not see the other one, could not hear it. It was dead. Maybe.

"Stay put," Paladin said.

"The other one will get me!"

Paladin did not reply. The native beat its wings, stirring the grain around it. It touched its hand to its head, then held it out for Chris to see again.

What do you want me to do about it? he thought, his hands clenched tightly on the rifle.

There was movement in the grass to his right. Chris stepped back, watching the grain bend as something pushed it, ripped it from the ground. It moved toward Chris on a wave as loud as a real one.

The other native chirped.

There was still no answer from Paladin.

Chris raised the rifle, aimed, fired at the movement in the grass. The native quickened its speed, barreling toward Chris, its one wing making a break through the grain like a "v."

Then it swerved, hard right. It leaped from the grain, shrieking.

It leaped at Paladin. Chris saw his shotgun barrel go up and fire before the native landed on him.

A squeal erupted in Chris's ear, followed by the shouts of Paladin outside of the headpiece. Chris ran to his aid, aware all the while that the smaller native could come up behind him and finish him off. He used his peripheral vision to check it. It had not moved.

The native with one wing had Paladin pinned. Paladin held its wrists, to keep it from tearing out his eyes. It had already gouged his face, and slashed the side of his neck.

Chris grabbed it from behind. Blood and feathers smeared his face and clothes as he pulled the creature from Paladin. It beat its one wing, knocking Chris in the head. Chris felt his grasp on the creature loosen.

"Run!" it said. "I will protect you."

Chris's mind raced. The thing had chirped. But he understood it now.

"Come on," Paladin said. His hat had been knocked off his head. Black and gray hair flew wild as the wind picked up. He wobbled as he rose on his knees, then motioned at the native. "Finish me off!"

The native glanced back at Chris. The look it gave him was almost tender and absolving in its intensity. "Go. You are Free."

It turned back to Paladin, just as Paladin, now standing, removed a knife from his belt. The native did not have a chance. Chris saw it stiffen when the blade pierced its chest. All Chris could see of it after it fell into the grain was the tip of its remaining wing.

"I'll call it in," Paladin said. He bent down, picked up his hat, and put it on. "Get the other one."

"But..." Chris saw Paladin stalk through the grain, toward the top of the rise where their gear was stowed.

He was alone. For the first time, Paladin had left him alone with their prey.

Chris turned toward the small native. It was being scooped from the field by a pair of the others that had been hovering above them moments before. They were moving slowly across the horizon, heading toward the river that was the border between the New River Territory and the Aurora Borealis Territory.

An easy shot. So blessedly simple.

But the rifle jammed when he aimed and prepared to fire. And as he fixed the problem, the natives were out of range, white specks on the horizon that dipped below the tree line, returning the sky to virgin blue.

Numbness washed over Chris like a salve. But he could feel, in his mind, a storm of confusion growing. Something ravenous, an instinct that had threatened to burst out before he made his fate.

Is that what I did? he thought, turning back to Paladin. He was a silhouette against their gear, a tall, gaunt scarecrow kneeling down before the radio, barking commands into it that the wind carried freely south, for anyone to hear.

And, as Chris approached him, watching the sun change the lines of blood and age on Paladin's face into fissures and cracks, his superior seemed less an injured man, more a cornered animal.

"You can ask me if I care. Go ahead. Ask me."

"Do you care?" Chris asked.

Paladin took a drink from his flask. He looked across the campfire, back at Rae, who was talking to Ev about a new circuit board for the damaged atmostat.

He stared Chris in the eye. Firelight turned the bandages on his face orange-white.

"No. Buy up your contract, if you got the money."

Chris looked down at his hands. It was a hot, humid night. Rae had helped them move near the river. They were camped in a grotto for the night. They were too close to the wilderness to go all the way back to the main office for supplies and medicaid. Turning around now would have run them all into a wave of homesteaders.

They would have had questions. What were they doing on untouched soil? What had caused them so many injuries?

It was thoughts of the homesteaders, and what he had accomplished that day, which caused Chris to consider his future. Paladin owned him for six years service, unless he had the money, with interest, to buy his own freedom.

He almost had the money. But he had an application for the Air Corps. He could get in just in time for training on the jump runs, commuter

flights between the New River Territory and the Aurora Borealis, when it was completed.

But nothing would happen, nothing could happen, until he had Rae. A sneaked glance at her across the fire told him she felt the same in regard to her future as a ranger.

And Paladin, unlike a few days before, seemed more resigned about the possibility. But then, he was almost amiable about everything when he was drunk.

"Bought you at discount, half price. Defective." Paladin took another swig from his flask. His fist knocked his hat back as he took a long, high drink. "Figured save myself the money. Wouldn't survive the first year."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

He gave a mock bow. "Sorry to disappoint you. You want me dead, do it yourself."

"I don't want you dead."

"You want me dead. If you didn't, I would've killed you by now."

He grinned at Chris when he said it, the sort of nasty grin you expected from someone completely drunk. But Paladin never looked drunk when he was. He always looked sober.

And Chris, long accustomed to Paladin's scant description of the buying of his life, found that the anger he had always choked down had not risen inside of him.

And it scared him. The numbness again, the feeling that things were going worse where they had once just gone wrong.

That a battle he had lost was not quite over yet.

"Ev says stay tight," Rae said. "Also got a red light near the river bend."

"What's the status?" Paladin asked.

"Fog conditions. Breech in perimeter fencing. Satellite shot showed it was cut."

"Could be the ones from today," Chris said.

"You need hands to cut, and real tools, not claws and junk scrap," Rae said. "You need intelligence to know why to cut."

"Doesn't matter," Paladin said. "Kill them either way."

Rae removed the headpiece from her ear. "It's me and Havenport on extermination. You're to stay behind until the medicaid arrives."

"I got work to do."

"Not with your injuries."

Paladin stood up. He was sober now. If he was in any real pain from his wounds, it was hard to see. "I can do my job," he said.

"Or you'll do their job."

She meant Convert's Disease, Chris realized. That the native could have bitten Paladin had not occurred to him.

Paladin held his ground. He stared at Rae, the withering stare Chris knew would not work on her.

"Fifteen years I've done this," he said. "No one tells me when to do it. It doesn't end until I end it."

"It's an order from Ev." She threw the radio headset across the campsite, a perfect arc between herself and Chris. Chris caught it, startled. "Talk to him."

Chris held the headset out to Paladin. Paladin took it, along with his flask. He walked away from the campsite, toward the sound of the river. Chris started to rise, to bring him down, then stopped.

Cynataka's full moon was high, casting a bright yellow glow between the spaces in the trees. Paladin had light to guide by. He was not going to off himself, no matter how much Chris wished he would.

He and Rae were alone. Not for long, but long enough to talk, to touch.

He heard her rise from the other side of the campsite, the click of a gun or laser. When he turned to look at her, she was standing near the campfire, holding a gun toward the ground. The light sharpened her features, gave her shadows a spider's frailness.

He thought of the native he'd helped kill days before. The one who called his name.

"I'm gonna go find him," she said, approaching him. Her kiss was eager, sloppy. "I'll turn on the perry. Get some sleep, 'kay?"

"Right," Chris said, as she slipped between the trees. He closed his eyes, and dreamed of flat gold eyes, and bloody hands.

At dawn, the world was gray. Chris awoke to find the trees, the sky, everything more than a meter away draped in fog. There was no sun to speak of, only a still dampness that clung to his skin like tape.

He sat up, and observed his surroundings. Rae's "perry," short for makeshift perimeter shield generator, hissed to show it operated. Her bedroll was bunched together, but empty.

Paladin's bedroll was as neat and ordered as always. The lack of toiletries around it suggested he had slept in it once, but not in the last hour or so.

Then where was he? Or they?

Chris walked over to the perimeter shield. He stared at it a moment, marveling at the pipes and belts that made it work. He could only guess which switch turned it off, and was lucky to find it on the first try.

He took the rifle from their gear. Chris decided the place to go was the river. It was where Paladin had headed last night. It was where he suspected Rae had gone after him. He took rushed steps through the unfamiliar territory. The stillness of the morning, and his suspicions, urged him on.

The ground was soft, and smelled of wet leaves, near the river's edge. Chris could barely see the water. The river itself was man made, added to the region by the New River Strike Team when Cynataka was first discovered and claimed. How far the river went, Chris didn't know. The source was the water table below the Territory; its flow controlled by a timer to ensure it rambled lazily, year round.

The river was deep where Chris had stopped. How deep, he could not tell. But floating on the surface were soap bubbles.

He followed the river upstream. More soap bubbles graced the river's surface, white clouds that would have been lighter but for the thick fog cover. Chris could not see the other side of the river, though he wanted to.

Maybe the natives from the day before were there. It stirred the numbness in his soul, which relieved him, a little. Nothing wrong with thinking about them. Nothing at all.

The soap trail started at Rae, who stood bathing in the river. The water went up to her waist. She was turned toward the opposite shore, humming as she lathered herself down.

"Morning," Chris said.

Rae stopped soaping herself. "Morning."

"Where's Paladin?"

"At camp."

"No, he's not."

"Then I don't know."

Rae rinsed herself off, the remaining soap drifting away downstream as she walked from the river.

"My towel," she said, walking past Chris toward a tree. She smelled of honey, of the morning.

She dried herself off as slowly as she had left the water. Chris listened for voices as he watched her. He listened for footsteps, for broken branches, for stray coughs. He could only hear the roll of the river.

She finished drying herself, and looked at Chris. He began to undress.

She wrapped her towel around her, and walked through the trees, through the fog. Chris followed, half in his shirt, still in his shorts. Rae had stopped at a small thicket. A blanket was stretched between two trees. Another blanket was on the ground.

"He was here last night," she said. "I followed him. He got drunk, then passed out. He was gone this morning. No native marks. Just his."

He nodded, and approached her, his clothes in his arms. He placed them on a corner of the ground blanket.

"Chris," she said. "We do this, everything changes. Tell me everything changes."

"Everything," he said, pulling her close. "Changes."

There was sunlight at the campsite, a faint yellowing of the fog that allowed Chris to see more of the surroundings than he had an hour before.

"Took an inventory of your supplies," Rae said, without looking up. "Shotgun's missing. Some shot, some rock salt. Your handgun and the stakes. A day's worth of food."

Chris picked up his bedroll, along with the two blankets from the copse. "When you think he took them?"

"While we were away."

"We have to go after him," Chris said. "Call for backup."

"No. I don't need backup. I never need backup." She strangled her bedroll, pulling the cords around it so tight he could hear them hum. Then she hoisted it on her shoulder. "I'm going to get a few things from my bike."

Chris watched her stomp away, his eyes following the damp spot

between her shoulder blades which showed through the fabric of her overalls. He cursed in his head, not at Rae, but at himself.

He felt the same. He had expected, after Paladin's blessing, after that morning with Rae, to feel ...

Normal, he supposed. Rae had cried, frustrated, in their last embrace. He felt the guilt he had felt before, looking into the eyes of the natives. They had cleaned up their bed at the river's edge, talking of the new lives they would have when New River was settled.

When New River was settled. Chris stared at his bedroll. Five natives that flew still at large. Unidentified natives at the border. Paladin missing, maybe even changed.

He wanted to laugh.

THE LAST ATMOSTAT was gone. Wires cascaded from the post where it had been.

Rae nudged Chris, pointed to the mud around the atmostat. There were soft soled footprints, and hoofprints in sets of two.

"A man did this," Rae said. She nudged the atmostat post with the butt of her rifle.

"Paladin?" Chris asked.

She shook her head. "But he's been here. What would he do now?"

Chris paced, his feet sinking in the mud, the water from it leaking into his shoes. The atmostat had been next to the river, in an area that was part marsh, part forest. The trees were short and stubbly, the brush cloud shaped and dark green. Fog swirled in pools around his ankles. The river gurgled not far away. It sounded like it was going down for the third time.

What would Paladin do now? he thought. The area was clean, except for the footprints. The native prints topped the human ones, however. Say Paladin destroyed the atmostat himself. It would put the exterminator team and himself on his trail immediately.

It would draw natives into the open.

"A duck shoot," Chris said. He looked at Rae. "He's setting a trap."

"Prints go south. Looks like a clearing through those trees. I'll go right, you go left. We'll circle, hope we find them before they find us."

"Right." He took the rifle from his shoulder, checked it. "I'm holding you to the bunkhouse when we cross."

She kissed his cheek. "When we cross."

He stared at her. Tears brimmed from her eyes.

"See ya," she said.

"Don't do this! We still got a chance — "

Rae was gone, through the trees, her feet silent in the thick mud as she ran.

Chris went the other way, feeling strange, inhibited. Nothing in the last hour, the last days, the last weeks, was right. Rae was gone to him in a way he could never recover her from. Paladin had never been encouraging, never been bearable. But at least he had been there.

Now he was alone.

God, he thought. Get me through this.

He found his footing on more stable ground. Fog continued to drift around him. It left tree branches and shrubs slick with moisture. The river was not far. He could smell it now, the pure, freshwater smell, along with the scent of bank mud.

And horse. The thick, musty smell of horses and fur, when it was wet.

He released the rifle's safety. Shouldn't be horses here, he thought.

And as he made the thought, the shotgun went off.

It was unmistakable thunder in the dim morning air. Chris caught a bright spurt of light less than fifty meters away. He broke through the trees toward it. He heard another shot.

"Go! Go!"

The sound of hooves at full gallop overpowered the sound of the gun. Chris stopped by a tree not far from the action. He could see horses moving, running in a circle. Atop them were human torsos, men with long hair that streamed down their heads, their backs. They carried sticks and clubs, a bow and arrow.

Chris thought there were three in all. He did not see the fourth until it shot him with an arrow.

The blow knocked him backward. Chris stared at the arrow protruding from his upper arm.

Blood poured from the wound. He was faint, until he saw the native

who had shot him. Average in size, as far as horses went. Its gold eyes were still and daunting.

"Who are you?"

Chris raised the rifle. It did not speak American, but it made sense. Not that it mattered any more. "Get away from me."

It scratched its ead, confused now. "I know you."

Chris shot it. He expected it to fall over; instead, it crumpled, its legs collapsing beneath it. Blood ran slowly from the small hole in the front of its chest. Chris did not want to see its back.

Its expression was still confused. So was Chris's.

I know you, it said.

Another shotgun shot, this time closer to the place where Chris was. He balanced the rifle between his legs, and took the knife from his belt. He sawed gently into the arrow's shaft, and when he could not take the action of the sawing any longer, he broke the rest of the shaft in half with his free hand.

He turned in response to the pain. He found himself staring into the face of the dying native, who wore a similar expression, though its eyes were closed. Its breathing was ragged, loud.

"Havenport!"

Chris turned at the sound of his name. Paladin was shouting for him from the clearing ahead.

"To the right! To the right!"

He took his rifle and moved on, stilling his wounded arm as best he could. The sound of a rifle shot cracked the air. It had to be Rae.

There were two natives in a circle now. One was limping badly. The other was struggling with Paladin. Paladin's clothes were torn. His hat was still on his head, but cocked back in a way so it looked as if he was about to fall over backward.

Paladin and the natives were struggling over the shotgun. Clubs and sticks lay scattered to the side of the clearing.

"Kill him," Paladin said. He turned his head toward Chris. "Now. Shoot him now."

The native looked at Chris. Its expression was set, almost confident.

"Do it! You done it before."

"I can't. I've been hit."

The native stared at him, at his arm. Then it lowered its head.

"I did not know it was you. I am sorry," it said.

"It's all right," Chris answered, without thinking. "Not your fault."

"Not your fault," Paladin said. Then he yelled so loud it startled Chris and the native. Paladin yanked the gun from the native's hands.

"No! Don't!"

Paladin shot the native in the chest, in the head. He emptied the rifle, and stumbled away from the creature's remains. He began to dig in his coat pockets.

The other native stumbled into the brush. Chris turned his head to watch it, too tired and hurt to chase it down. Then he turned back to Paladin.

Paladin found what he was searching for, and aimed it at Chris. It was the hand gun.

"Should've known," Paladin said. "Dammit."

"What did I do?"

"Deviated from the pattern. Acted like something worth keeping, but you ain't no different, damn you!" He released the safety, pulled the trigger. "Should've treated you like the others. Should've bagged my haul, then made you pay just like the others."

Chris heard the bullet before it hit Paladin. It struck him in the heart, another struck him in the kidneys. He swayed for a moment before dropping to his knees, then face down, into the soil.

Rae emerged from the trees, the rifle sitting ready to fire in her hands. Chris stared at her, then at Paladin.

Then back at her. He pulled the gun from Paladin's hands. He aimed it at Rae.

"You're one of them," he said.

"So are you."

"No."

She approached him slowly. "Paladin knew."

"No."

"It's why he chose you from the orphanage. It's why he chose all of 'em from the orphanage, don't you get it? We're dropped there as children, to blend in. The human ones draw the other ones out. He figured that out."

He tightened his grip on the gun. His hands shook.

She was closer now.

"Ev put us together on purpose."

"Convert's Disease."

"A lie. To buy us time. To protect you."

Chris's throat was tight. His voice came out a whisper. "You killed Paladin."

"You never would."

She was squatting next to him now. Slowly, she lowered her rifle. Then she put a hand on Chris's hand, the one that held the handgun. She lowered his arm.

"It's our land first," she said. "It's always ours. Then the settlers arrive."

Chris nodded, numb to what she was saying. Where do the gods go when they die? she had asked him.

Nowhere was the answer. They never left.

He dropped the gun to the ground.

"You still gonna be a ranger?" he asked, after a moment. "In Aurora Borealis?"

"You still going to be a pilot?"

They looked at each other. The questions hung in the air, vibrant, full. The words on the tip of Chris's tongue were just as vibrant, just as potent.

But he could not say them. In his heart, he honestly did not know.

Rae stood up. She slung the rifle over her shoulder. Chris followed suit, holding the rifle in his good hand, letting his arm hang limply to his side.

"I'll call for help," she said. "Paladin got ambushed. We finished them off."

"We'll need help burning them, too."

She nodded, and went for their equipment.

Chris stood in the clearing, watching the dead. He half expected the injured native to return. He almost hoped it would. It would not live long without medical assistance. He could help it, maybe.

He could heal it, maybe.

Chris touched his arm. In his fingers was the spark of something. He could not put a name to it, but it frightened him more than anything else had that afternoon. ↗



FILMS

KATHI MAIO

KEN AND BARBIE IN THE HOUSE OF BUGGIN'

THE LATE science fiction master, Robert A. Heinlein, and the Dutch-born, big-budget Hollywood director, Paul Verhoeven, have at least one thing in common besides *Starship Troopers*, the recent \$100 million dollar movie which Verhoeven directed from one of Heinlein's most popular novels. Folks have always suspected that both men brought a political agenda to their creative work. And yet, there's never been much consensus on exactly what those agendas were.

Heinlein has been viewed as, among other things, a fascist, a libertarian, a social Darwinist, and, conversely, as a beloved guru of the progressive sixties youth rebellion. Verhoeven has been viewed as a homophobe, a sophisticated, sex-positive, social democrat, a war

survivor horrified by barbarity, and an egotistical blood-junkie who gets off on violence. And both have been labeled admirers of independent women as well as sexist pigs.

Not surprisingly, judgment of their work is just as varied. Is Heinlein a hack or a literary lion? Is Verhoeven a hack or an auteur?

If I were making the call — and since this is my film column, I guess I am — I'd have to vote for all of the above. Strong, if somewhat self-contradictory, social attitudes seem to be present in the work of both men. And, although I recognize the high repute and influence of Heinlein's stories and novels, and (to a much lesser extent) Verhoeven's Dutch and Hollywood films, I can't say that I've ever been a fan of either.

Maybe testosterone is the missing link, here. I know that many men get quite sentimental about *Starship Troopers*, the novel. It is

one of those *bildungsromans* that provide many young lads with an exciting blueprint for becoming manly men. But Heinlein's Hugo-winning paean to the warrior spirit left me vaguely offended and extremely bored. (And if I'd had to read the phrase "on the bounce" one more time, I would have bounced the bloody paperback off the wall.)

Yes, I know, in the Terran Federation (and at certain sf conventions) I'd probably hang for such sedition. Still, even though I was no fan of Heinlein's novel about a young man named Johnnie who comes of age by training to fight a race of "bugs," I certainly recognized its cinematic potential. *Starship Troopers* is the kind of book that would allow a filmmaker to join the slick design of sf moviemaking and state-of-the-art "creature feature" FX with the more traditional (and, these days, seldom seen) conventions associated with film formulas like the western and the war movie.

Screenwriter Ed (Robocop) Neumeier was certainly aware of the rich possibilities when he first drafted an adaptation and brought it to producer Jon Davison. And the version that finally made it onto the big screen some six years later

is, generally speaking, both true to his source material and to moviemaking tradition.

Oh, there is plenty for the Heinlein fanatic to grouse about in *Starship Troopers*, the movie. Less time is spent on Johnnie's training (Officer Candidates School is completely ignored) and more, much more, is spent on bug battles. Certain support characters are combined. Other minor characters who go off and die in the book—notably Johnnie's high school pal, Carl (played in the film by *Doogie Howser's* Neil Patrick Harris)—go off and come back with a higher rank and an important role to play, in the movie.

And then, there's the romance. Heinlein didn't have any. (His novel was, after all, written for the juvenile market.) Although Heinlein's Johnnie seems fond of his school chum turned pilot, Carmencita, he doesn't actively pursue her or any other passing female. Reading this book, you'd almost guess that Heinlein was interested in the mortification (corporal and capital punishment are both endorsed) of the flesh much more than its gratification.

But Neumeier evidently felt the need to spice up his screen concoction with lustful, longing glances

as well as machine gun fire. He has fashioned a love quadrangle out of bits of Heinlein and too many hours spent watching the nighttime soaps. In the film, Johnnie (Casper Van Dien) is in love with his high school sweetheart, Carmen (Denise Richards). But Carmen is distracted by her military aspirations and by the hunky charms of another flyboy wannabe, Zander (Patrick Muldoon). This frustrates Johnnie no end, keeping him from recognizing the total devotion of Dizzy (Dina Meyer), a highly attractive quarterback turned crackerjack infantry-woman.

This particular subplot sounds like something out of an Aaron Spelling production. And well it might. The blandly pretty cast of unknowns — all the money that would have gone for star salaries was transferred into the FX budget, instead — are veterans of shows like *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Melrose Place*, as well as daytime dramas. They make toothsome but plastic-looking Aryan warriors, which gives their little wartime space opera a kind of playtime sweetness. Will Ken grow up to become G.I. Joe? And what will happen to our living dolls when Ken, Barbie, Skipper, and Scott wander from their Malibu Dream House

into a nightmarish House of Buggin'?

It's certainly fair to slam the movie for its romantic flourishes. But I don't think that it's appropriate to complain, as some have done, about the film's flat characters. Heinlein's characters are, if anything, even more cardboard than Neumeier's. They just use less hair gel. Even Johnnie is a bit of a cipher by the end of the book, because Heinlein's main interest wasn't character study, but rather the process of achieving manhood — the crucible a boy must withstand to achieve full citizenship. Hence, we see Johnnie's tribulations, but learn little about who he is inside. He — and we — are too busy listening to the diatribes of his "History and Moral Philosophy" teachers.

A few lines of these lectures are retained by the film, and delivered by another composite character, school-teacher-turned-platoon-leader, Jean Rasczak (played by veteran character Michael Ironside — one of the few real-looking people in this movie). But since this is an action movie, philosophizing isn't done by words. It is done by deed. And by the shorthand of costume and production design.

But the look of the movie is one of the most disturbing elements.

Rather than downplay the (perceived as) fascist elements of Heinlein's novel, director Verhoeven decides to play them up, bigtime. Ellen Mirojnick's costumes look like something from the Sixth Reich. Harris's uniform late in the movie is especially startling, since it looks just like that of an S.S. officer. Likewise the production design, by Allan Cameron, creates an eerie Earth life that mixes California chic with clean, gleaming futuristic fascism. (Don't miss the Swastika-like designs on the Federation flags and insignia.)

Now, *Starship Troopers* is obviously not the first film to nazify the after ages. But few have done it with such an admiring, positive spin. (These are the *heroes* of the film in the nazi youth garb, you'll recall.) Some of Verhoeven's shots — especially those in the Federation news/commercial spots that pepper the film — are taken right out of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. And he has admitted as much. While producer Davison notes in the presskit for the movie that "[w]e thought the idea of a fascistic utopia was new to recent film; it was both interesting and amusing."

Yeah, I'm still laughing merrily over that one.

Believe it or not, Verhoeven indicated in a recent interview that after the debacle that was *Showgirls*, he was happy to do a film with no "controversial elements." Guess again, Paulie.

Some might say that the fascism of *Starship Troopers* is meant as blistering satire. But I don't buy that. I got not a whiff of irony from the entire movie. And I swear that none of the mostly young, mostly male, audience I saw the film with did, either. They did appreciate the coed shower scene and the close-up of Dina Meyer's nice breasts. (A touch Mr. Heinlein probably would have appreciated, himself.) And they also seemed to get an erotic charge out of the scene in which the buff young hero is publicly flogged. (Hmmm, let's skip any speculation on what that means.)

But, mainly, the audience had a high old time, watching the marauding pseudo-arachnids of Klendathu perform the many decapitations, amputations, and varied dismemberments of the comely cast in the movie's repeated battle scenes.

Since the movie version of *Starship Troopers* is, above all, a creature feature with an overpopulation problem, let me take a moment to say something about the

bugs. They're really swell. And scary. I mean that.

The ever-brilliant Phil Tippett and all the magicians he amassed to do Computer-Generated Imagery and full-scale mechanical critters outdid themselves on this one. They created a range of gruesome insects (tanker bugs, brain bugs, plasma bugs, hoppers, and the ever-popular warrior bugs) that truly had the power to keep you on the edge of your seat.

And maybe that's enough, today. Maybe it shouldn't matter that the performers seemed more concerned about hitting their marks than creating a believable performance. And who cares that battle-scene-to-battle-scene plot movement was driven by movieland clichés. (Of course, Mom and Dad "buy the farm"—as Heinlein would have said — while they are on the videophone with their son. And, of

course, a cheerful, noble black grunt is going to have to blow himself up to save his white cohorts. And, of course, when the platoon leader kills one of his own who is injured and captured, and then says "I'd expect someone to do the same for me," we know that shortly thereafter the hero will have to do just that. Etc., etc.)

Let's not ponder why they send, in the high-tech future, ground troops to fight a pincer à manobattle with a race of dedicated "troopers" five to twenty times bigger than they are. (Isn't Dow Chemical still around to create a cross between Raid and Napalm?) And let's not, for goodness sake, worry our heads about the politics of this action extravaganza.

Let's just enjoy the carnage. And wish Ken and Barbie well as they goose-step their way into the future.



K. D. Wentworth lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with a large dog and numerous finches. She is often drawn to religious themes in her writing; last Christmas, you may recall, she gave us a decidedly different view of holy days in "Tis the Season." Now she takes us to the stars with a more serious and rather luminous story of missionaries among an alien race.

Tall One

By K.D. Wentworth

FATHER JOHANNES KNELT beside the grave, his cassock bunched to protect his knees. The cold, too-thin air of Sheah Four wheezed through his

straining chest. He bowed his head in prayer, then hoisted the final rock to the top of the cairn. Sitting back on his heels, he ached for his native Alps, for stately old Luzern poised like a cut jewel on its shimmering blue ice-melt lake, the pristine swans that drifted across the mirrored surface like angels. When he closed his eyes, he could smell the water lapping against wet stone, see the boxes of red and pink and white flowers crowding every window.

He shuddered. When he qualified for the two-man missionary post here, he had thought the mountains rearing up into the violet-tinged sky would feel like home; he'd imagined small faces turned up to him, not human, of course, but recognizably innocent and trusting, waiting for the gifts of love and salvation he brought. Nothing in his training at the seminary had prepared him for a malevolent yellow-white sun that

burned his fair skin a leathery walnut-brown, or dry, oxygen-poor air that made his chest ache all the time. And no one had really explained about the khe.

He lurched heavily to his feet and saw one of the beasts sitting on its haunches behind him, its green eyes wide, neckfrill spread to catch the sun, a study in kheish patience. Its satiny black skin crawled with photobiotic green fire in the sunlight.

The young priest's hands trembled as he picked up the simple cross he had crafted from native wood. Just being near one of these heathen creatures still made him break out in a cold sweat. The blunt, lipless snout, the earless skull, the long sinuous body, every part of it screamed *serpent*.

He stared at it. At this time of day, it should be perched on a rock somewhere, soaking up the sun. What did it want? Surely not salvation. In the eight months since he and Father Gareth had arrived, he had realized at least that much. The khe were filthy beasts, barely sentient, uninterested in artifice or artifacts, having nothing in common with humanity. And yet, as Father Gareth had frequently reminded him, the Lord God had made them as surely as He had made everything else, and therefore how could Johannes not love them?

He wedged the cross into a crevice between the stones and anchored it with gravel. He coughed, then coughed again, a hard wracking spasm that could only be controlled, not cured. His throat was continually raw, his cells slowly starving, a condition that had weakened Father Gareth and ultimately killed him. "The oxygen content there is marginal," the Placement Office had said, "but man can survive."

But was mere survival the same as living? Johannes knew now it was not. Despite the rigorous selection process, they had sent the wrong man. Sheah Four brought out faults in him that he had never suspected; he was a weak vessel, even base. Without Father Gareth's experience and gentle guidance, he would never be able to carry on the Lord's work here.

Behind him, the khe's clawed fingers scritched over the rubble.

He steeled himself, then turned to meet the poisonous green eyes. The beast was full grown, its head reaching his shoulder as it sat on all fours. "What — does one want?" he whistled in the stilted kheish grammar that knew nothing of personal names and permitted only the present tense.

The khe's muzzle wove from side to side, black tongue flickering like summer lightning. "Speak of one under rocks."

Johannes blanched. He wanted to say a funeral mass over the grave, speak the ancient words meant to give comfort to those left behind and find serenity in the familiar motions in this hellish place so far from home, but he knew what Father Gareth would have done. He closed his eyes, praying for guidance. He had tried to communicate with the primitives many times without success. These creatures had no word for God, no word for affection or love. How could he even begin to explain that Father Gareth had gone to his Maker?

"Tall one goes to live with its parent," he said in the barbarous whistlespeech.

"Not lives — dies!" The khe scabbled forward, snout raised, and curled three sinuous fingers around his wrist. Its flesh clung to his skin like warm plastic.

Johannes stiffened, his heart racing sickly. He could not bear these creatures to touch him. Gritting his teeth, he tried to think of some way to explain. "Tall one walks this earth no more, but — walks in another place with — parent." He tried to ease away from its grip, but it held on.

The slitted eyes were glittering wells of emerald. "Another place?" Did it understand? "Yes."

The black tongue darted out-in. "Where?"

"Place where — one goes when one dies." In spite of the chill, sweat beaded the priest's brow. He mopped his forehead with his sleeve.

The khe sidled closer until he could feel its breath on his face, hot and feathery, musky. "One who dies goes to mountain."

Johannes grimaced. The khe exposed their dead high up on the side of the mountain where predators and scavengers feasted on the remains, a heathenish, disgusting custom. "One's body goes to mountain, but one's —" He shuddered as it pressed closer. Its neckfrill was in his face now. The photobiotic iridescence was more noticeable there, green splotches and lines that separated, then ran together like a map of some distant place he'd never been. "One's —" he tried again, then finally gave in and used the human term, even though it was just meaningless sounds to the khe. "One's spirit, what is inside, goes back to parent."

The khe whistled something shrill and incomprehensible and pushed him away, bathing him in a smoldering green gaze before it wandered into the surrounding purple-gray scrub. He stared after it, rubbing his wrist, then sank to his knees on the rocks before the crude wooden cross and gripped his hands in prayer until his knuckles shone white. The chill thin air dried the tears on his cheeks almost as fast as they fell.

HE DIDN'T RETURN to the rectory until the yellow-white sun hung low in the sky, already half-obscured by the mountains. He limped along the mossy bluff overlooking the stream, his knees bruised and aching, passing khe after khe stretched out in the sun like sleek black plants, soaking up radiant energy. He had to hurry. When the sun sank behind the mountains, the khe would stir themselves and hunt until twilight deepened into darkness. He found their cheerful slaughter at that time of day even more disturbing than watching them like this.

Their photobiotic cells provided a large portion of their daily energy intake, perhaps as much as fifty percent, according to the exobiologists who had catalogued Sheah Four several decades ago, but for the rest of their energy needs, as well as trace elements and certain vital nutrients, the khe hunted small insects and animals, consuming them in a brief feeding frenzy during the hours when the light was no longer direct enough to fully stimulate their photobiotic cells, but darkness had not yet rendered them torpid.

He passed the rows of straggly peas and green beans in Father Gareth's tiny kitchen garden, remembering the tall, patient blond man. From the moment he had first set foot in this shimmering silver and violet valley, Father Gareth had loved the khe, ministering to them tenderly, anointing the soft-skinned, playful pups with holy water and baptizing them one and all in the name of the Lord. "It doesn't matter that they don't understand," he'd said. "In time they will, and the Lord wants them now."

Johannes couldn't repress a shudder. "They look like snakes."

Father Gareth's mild blue eyes narrowed. "Rather more like salamanders, I should think, if you must speak of Earth, but they are not of Earth. They are themselves, beautiful in their own right, holy in their perfection as God's creatures."

Holy.... Johannes shivered and entered the prefabricated one-room bungalow he had shared with the older priest.

After a miserable dinner of warmed-over beans and rice, he sat down before the tiny scribe's screen and tried to complete Father Gareth's reports. The ship would return with two replacements in eighteen months and they would expect to see figures — so many baptized, so many converted, so much of the Bible translated and preached to the khe. If Father Gareth had lived, it might have all happened. As it was...

He crossed his arms on the keyboard and rested his forehead against them. They would find Father Gareth dead and his mission dead along with him, no converts, no church, no alliance with the khe. His eyelids drooped.

"Son, you can't give up," Father Gareth's voice whispered suddenly, but Johannes lacked the energy to look up. *"You have to make them understand."*

"But —" Johannes fought to open his leaden eyes. He seemed to feel warm fingers rest upon his head in benediction.

"Go out among them and minister. Feed my flock."

He started, sat up, blinking, heart pounding. He was alone, of course, the only light the screen's pale luminescence. Outside, the sun had dipped behind the mountains, casting the valley into darkness. The unceasing wind howled around the tiny building. Minister to the khe? He shook his head. They were the most self-sufficient creatures he had ever known, needing neither garments or housing, tools with which to cultivate or weapons to hunt. And as for their spiritual needs, as far as he and Father Gareth had been able to ascertain, they'd never conceived of God in any form, however primitive. What could Johannes offer them that they could possibly need?

He pulled on his heavy coat, pocketed the stunner and picked up the freshly charged cold-lantern. He had seldom gone out at night himself, but he knew that, after dark, the khe sought out small depressions of rock and huddled together in a half-conscious torpor caused by ebbing energy levels which made them vulnerable to nighttime attack.

He stepped out into a singing darkness that was more a shade of deep purple than black, his ears instantly numbed by the fierce wind. He pulled his hood up and switched on the lantern. Overhead, the stars continued

their slow eternal dance, dazzling and indifferent. He shivered and picked his way through clumps of scrubby silver-sage toward the nearest rocky rise that had shown signs of khe habitation.

The lantern caught a mass of supple black bodies threaded with green fire that blazed under the intense white light. Hot liquid-jade eyes slit open. Johannes's mouth moved, but he suddenly felt ridiculous. What could he say?

Minister to them, Father Gareth whispered inside his head.

He cleared his throat nervously. "Does — one need anything?"

The black tangle quivered, then a khe separated itself and slunk toward him, belly pressed to the rock-strewn ground. "Light," it whistled. "Light-that-moves!" It touched its snout to his boots.

The others surged forward then and enclosed him in a warm press of lithe bodies, staring expectantly up at his face. He shifted his weight uncomfortably.

"Tall one comes back," a khe whistled softly, "from under rocks."

He flinched. They were confusing him with Father Gareth, who had often come out in the night like this. "No," he answered, then squatted down, even though the touch of their satiny hides made him want to run. The breath shuddered in and out of his lungs as he set the cold-lantern on the ground. "But once many suns ago in this one's place —" He hesitated, trying to frame the familiar old story in the khe's restrictive present tense grammar. "Once one dies and comes back after three suns."

A khe gripped his leg, lightly, almost like a caress. "Tall one?"

"A tall one." He tried to meet the bottomless green eyes without looking away. "One comes and speaks of —" This was the point at which he always failed. He knew the kheish word for physical joining for the purpose of procreation, but had never found any word to express love or reverence. "Speaks of liking for parent, for sibling, for offspring." He hesitated, watching their attentive ebony faces. "One has a sound for this liking?"

The khe were statues focused on the light.

"One has this same liking for these, for all tall ones." He touched his chest, feeling the pounding of his heart within. Was he finally going to make them understand? "The one who comes back has this liking for all khe too."

"Where is this one?" The khe, still holding his leg, cocked its head. Johannes's chest ached. "Outside."

"Where?" The khe's digits tightened until its claws pierced the coarse fabric of his cassock.

"Outside sky, mountains, outside — everything," he faltered.

The khe released him. Its eyes narrowed, baffled, unbelieving. Johannes sighed and picked up the lantern. They surged around him, snuffling, whining in the backs of their throats, plucking at the lantern with anxious digits.

"Light!" they whistled softly, then louder, more boldly. "Light-that-moves!"

His skin crawling, Johannes shoved past them, tripping over their legs, bouncing off smooth sides, and fled back to the rectory, slamming the door behind him and throwing the bolt.

Late into the night, as he hunched on his cot in the dark and stared at the invisible ceiling, he heard the whisper of bodies against the door, the skritch of claws on the roof.

They were still there when he emerged the next morning, twenty or more, arrayed in a scattered semicircle, neckfrills already spread to catch the first slanting rays of the rising sun. He hesitated in the doorway, his fingers gripping the frame. Uncertain of their mood, he made himself cross the threshold.

A khe raised its muzzle. "Tall one comes back from rocks."

"No." Johannes swallowed hard. They were still confusing him with Father Gareth. "Tall one does not come back. Tall one is dead." He touched his own chest. "This one *Father Johannes*." Whistletalk did not permit true reproduction of human speech phonemes, but he used the rhythm of the syllables while assigning them tones.

The rows of khe stared at him in stony silence. He knew they didn't use personal names, and yet, why not? They understood the concept of nouns, and how could he explain about God and Jesus and the saints if he could never refer to them by name? Just because the khe had no names now didn't mean they couldn't learn. "Father Johannes," he whistled again, pointing at himself. "You make same sound."

The only movement was the nervous dance of paper-thin tongues,

then, one by one, they turned their green eyes away and drifted into the feathery silver-sage. His hands clenched as he watched them glide away. Not now, not when he was so close! He could feel they were on the very edge of comprehension. Just a few minutes more and he might be able to at least begin to lead them to God.

"Wait!" he whistled and ran to block one's path. He touched his chest. "Make sound — Father Johannes, Father Johannes!"

The khe hissed and drew back, its head weaving in confusion, its black tongue flickering. "Light," it said. "This one go light."

"One time!" Gasping in the too-thin air, Johannes stepped in front of it again as it tried to slither around him. "Make sound!"

The startled khe fastened needle-teeth in his upper arm and tossed him aside with one shake of its muscular neck. His head struck the rectory steps with a sharp burst of pain, and then a black nothingness swallowed him.

HIS HEAD THROBBED and sharp edges bit into his flesh, weighing him down, making it even more difficult to breathe than usual. His eyes opened, but he saw only a faint grayness.

Where was he? Panic surged through him. He couldn't breathe. He had to get up! He struggled to move his arms, his legs. Finally, with a grating rattle, his right leg moved a few inches and whatever was holding him down rolled away, partially freeing his right arm as well. He wriggled and squirmed and more weight slid away until he finally could sit up.

Rocks surrounded him, covering his torso and left leg, ranging in size from pebbles to fist-sized stones. He stared numbly. The khe must have thought he was dead and buried him in a shallow layer of rubble in the same way he had covered Father Gareth's grave yesterday.

He had a marble-sized knot on the back of his head and was scraped from head to toe. His left arm ached fiercely where the khe's bite had broken the skin. He bent forward and rested his throbbing forehead against his knees, seeking the strength to get up and go inside the rectory before the khe came back and finished the job.

He had been so stupid, losing control and frightening them. His cheeks burned as he remembered how Father Gareth had been the very

soul of patience and understanding with these primitive creatures. Now they would never listen to him. He would never lead them to God.

At dusk, the khe gathered outside the rectory, whistling in a low chorus that harmonized in a minor key. His heart pounded as he cracked the door. Above the mountains, the gathering night was a deep purple contrasting with paler mauve in the west. A mass of black bodies waited, more than had come that morning, more than he had ever seen at the same time since he and Father Gareth had arrived, possibly the entire khe population of the valley.

A large beast stepped forward, its body alive with iridescent photobiotic fire, its simmering green eyes focused on his face. "One comes back from under rocks."

He pocketed the stunner before opening the door further and easing down the steps. The temperature had already dropped below freezing and his breath plumed white in the growing dimness. He smelled the dank muskiness of their bodies. "You cover one with rocks, but this one not dead."

"Tall one comes back!" it insisted shrilly.

Several khe filtered through the assembled ranks and dropped small gray lumps in the silvery moss at his feet. Without taking his eyes off the khe, he bent his knees and fumbled for one of the lumps. His fingers closed around a small furry beast, punctured by khe tooth-marks, still faintly writhing. Warm blood seeped over his hand.

He shuddered and held it out. "What is this for?"

The large khe nosed the animal in his hand. "Eat, then one makes light."

So they had brought him food, probably a good sign. He stroked the tiny rodent-like creature's silken fur, regretting its pain. Perhaps the khe were sorry too for hurting him earlier. Perhaps they did have the capacity for a conscience, a potential for recognizing and avoiding sin.

"Wait." He ducked back inside and laid the suffering creature on Father Gareth's cot. He put on his coat, then took the cold-lantern outside and set it on the ground, the white bulb cutting through the darkness like a beacon. The khe whistled softly and surged forward, neckfrills raised as though it were full daylight.

He sat on the rock-strewn ground beside the lantern, aching all over,

especially in his wounded arm. His throat was dry. "This one does not come back." He pointed to himself. "But once one does."

A khe nosed the lantern. "One comes back, makes light?"

"No." Johannes rubbed his throbbing forehead and frowned. No matter how hard he tried, things always seemed to get mixed up. "This one different. This one—" He concentrated, trying to get the best approximation of the human phonemes in whistletalk. "This one Jesus."

The khe were creeping closer, curling themselves around the well of cool white light until sleek black bodies laced with iridescent green enclosed him on every side. Their watching eyes were hot pools of melted emeralds.

He resisted the claustrophobic urge to push them back. "Jesus dies, then comes back after three suns, has much liking for khe."

A smaller khe scabbled up and over the backs of the ones blocking it from the light and plopped down in front. The others hissed at it, shifting their three-toed forelegs restlessly.

"This one, Jesus, says khe must like each one, each khe, and—" Another young beast climbed the black wall of bodies, slid down to the front and knocked the lantern over with its splayed claws. Johannes hastily shoved the beast back and righted the lantern. "And each khe must like this one, this Jesus."

One of the larger adults seized the young interloper by the ruff and, with a powerful twist of its neck, tossed it back into the crowd. A fight erupted as it landed halfway back and the khe became a whirling mass of bodies that clawed and bit. Some retreated, but others, jostled or struck by accident, leaped into the fray until it was a full-blown riot.

Appalled, Johannes scrambled to his feet as they rolled toward him. The khe had never once shown aggression toward each other in all the cultural studies done in the early survey. That was one of the primary reasons the Church had thought them promising enough to establish a mission here.

"Stop!" he whistled. "One must stop this now!"

The squirming, clawing creatures bowled into the lantern and knocked it over. This time the light flickered and failed. The fighting lasted a few more seconds, then sputtered out in the darkness. All sound died away except for the hiss of labored breathing.

Johannes fumbled for the lantern and hugged it to his chest. Blood thundered in his ears. Khe snuffled at his heels as he edged toward the rectory, one arm extended to find his way in the darkness.

"Light," it whistled mournfully.

Then another took up the chorus, "Light-that-moves!"

His groping hand found the door and keyed it open with his palm-print. It slid aside and a tall rectangle of yellow light spilled out onto the mossy ground outside. He looked back and saw green eyes staring at him hungrily.

The rodent-creature died twitching in his hands later in the night. Johannes wrapped the soft gray-furred body in one of Father Gareth's shirts. No doubt they hadn't meant to be cruel, any more than they had meant to hurt him, or each other. They were savages, unenlightened. They needed the Word more than any primitives he had ever worked with back on Earth.

But whistletalk was so limited. If only Father Gareth were with him. Kneeling beside the cot, he buried his face in his hands and prayed for guidance. All he wanted was to do good here, make their pathetic lives fuller, give them a possibility of salvation and grace. If only the Lord would show him the way.

At dawn, he fell into an exhausted sleep filled with angry khe that snapped and hissed, and Father's Gareth's craggy, disappointed face. There was something the older priest wanted him to do, something he couldn't quite grasp. It glittered above his head in purest blues and reds and yellows like the immense stained glass rose window he had seen once in Notre Dame, beautiful and utterly out of reach.

He awoke with a start, his head pillowled on his outstretched arms on his cot, his back stiff, a hot dryness behind his eyes. Something was scratching at the door, rhythmical and insistent. He glanced at his watch — eight o'clock local time, well after dark. He rose to his feet unsteadily and picked up the stunner before he slivered the door open.

A scattering of stars glittered down from the purple-black sky. The valley's complement of khe sat on their haunches, waiting, little more than sleek black lumps in the faint glimmer of starlight. "Light," one whistled, then the rest took up the refrain. "Light-that-moves! Light!"

"No!" Johannes stepped outside and pulled the door closed to help his eyes adjust in the dimness. "No light! Go away!"

They quieted gradually, but did not move. Johannes shivered as the frigid night wind shrilled around the rectory. "Go now," he said. "One talks in sun."

"One comes back from under rocks," a front khe said. Four or five beasts surged forward, dragging something long and heavy between them, much larger than the rodent-creatures they had brought the night before.

He stared down at the dark shape, but could make nothing out. Finally, he slipped back into the rectory. The bulb in the cold-lantern was cracked from the night before so he changed it, then took it outside. The khe stood back from their offering as he squatted down to illuminate it.

Pallid white skin reflected the lantern light, bloodless lips drawn back over teeth, dull blond hair, sunken sightless eyes — it was Father Gareth.

Johannes's mouth fell open in a soundless cry of shock.

A large khe nosed the body. "One comes back."

"Don't touch him!" Johannes shoved the beast back, then raised the stunner. "Go away!" He fired into the air. The charge crackled like lightning, dissipating harmlessly above his head. The khe stirred, whistling among themselves, staring at the cold-lantern with hungry eyes.

Shaking, he thumbed the setting to its lowest level which would only shock. Hot tears welled in his eyes as he fired at the nearest beast. It squealed as its muscles spasmed, then recovered and limped off into the darkness. Sobs wracked him as he fired again and again until the pack dispersed.

His head rang and the flat taste of ozone from the weapon's discharge filled the chill air. He knelt at Father Gareth's side and hesitantly crossed the battered arms over the corpse's chest, then sat back on his heels, hugging himself and rocking. All the sun-filled days in Switzerland amidst the polished wood and ancient stone of the seminary, all those hours of discussing the joy of bringing the lost to God, none of it had ever prepared him for this place and these disgusting creatures. And, worst of all was the knowledge that this obscene misunderstanding must be his fault; he had failed to tell the story in a way the khe could understand.

He didn't know what to do. If he buried Father Gareth again, they would undoubtedly just dig the corpse up and tote it back. Perhaps if he

took the body up into the mountains and exposed it, then they would understand.... But no, he couldn't allow his mentor and brother priest to be treated like a piece of meat. There had to be another way, something cleaner, more dignified, something the khe could not undo.

Finally he decided on fire, not the Church's preferred method, but allowable and at least final. He took the cold-lantern down to the stream and searched for driftwood as the wind gusted and the night-hunters cried out in the surrounding hills. The breath wheezed through his chest in the chill, oxygen-poor night air. When he finally had enough wood for a pyre, he laid Father Gareth's body atop the crooked stack and lit a layer of silver-moss around the edges with a lighter.

The flames started slowly, almost reluctantly, but eventually gained strength until they roared and glowing sparks drifted up into the darkness. He kept watch through the night, adding more wood as needed.

Hot green eyes followed him everywhere, keeping pace when he left to search for wood, then returning, sitting just outside the circle of light, waiting, waiting for something. He was afraid to think about what.

BY MORNING, the ashes still steamed and the scent of wood smoke hung low over the valley. The khe had slunk off to their favorite sunning rocks with the first rays of dawn. Church doctrine demanded the ashes be collected and interred together, but that would have to wait until later in the day when they had cooled. He made his way to the rectory on leaden feet and tumbled onto his cot, drawn down into a whirling, exhausted sleep.

He woke at dusk, his eyes swollen from tears shed in his sleep, his face wet and raw. He washed and changed his smoky cassock for a clean one, choked down a few bites of a nutrition concentrate, then found an empty equipment box and went outside to complete Father Gareth's last rites.

The khe surrounded the silvery ashes, solemn and silent. They closed in behind him as he pushed past their lithe black bodies, the stunner ready in his fist. His legs felt distant and clumsy, like lifeless stumps he had only borrowed. He placed the box on the ground and opened the lid. "Go away," he told the front row of khe.

"Tall one comes back," one of the beasts whistled. "Becomes light."

Johannes's eyes flicked toward the silver-black ashes. "No, tall one is dead."

"Tall one becomes light, fills darkness like sun!" The khe's green eyes were round and earnest. "This one sees."

The surrounding khe hissed in assent. Their satiny black muzzles wove from side to side. Their clawed toes curled.

Why did it always come down to light; he asked himself. Then he looked down at the khe with their neckfrills raised to catch the last rays of the setting sun. Light gave them life and movement, provided raw energy for their cells. Light was a pleasure as much as eating was to a starving human, the fulfilling of a basic physical need, the cessation of hunger. Pagan creatures that they were, they saw light as the source of life, not understanding that all light, as part of Creation, comes from God.

He sank to his knees and bowed his head, praying for forgiveness. Did not the Bible say, "God is light, and in him is no Darkness at all." He had been foolish and short-sighted, but perhaps there was a way to bring them the Word.

After he buried Father Gareth's ashes in the struggling garden, he ranged far downstream and gathered as much driftwood as he could find before dark. When the sun had fallen behind the purple-gray mountains, he brought out the cold-lantern and waited.

The khe appeared in groups of twos and threes, their tongues sampling the night air, their eyes questioning. He sat on the ground before the pile of wood with a Bible in his hands. When the sleek black backs surrounded him on every side and he could see expectant green eyes watching from far out in the darkness, he opened the Bible to the first page. "In the beginning, One makes the sky and the ground," he read, paraphrasing the verses into whistletalk. "And darkness is everywhere."

The khe shifted restlessly. A medium-sized adult at his feet said plaintively, "One comes back?"

"Darkness is *everywhere*," Johannes repeated and stared meaningfully up into the black night sky. "And One says let there be light and there is light." He pointed at the lantern.

The khe edged forward, raising its neckfrill, its eyes unblinking.

"This One makes light, this one God." He picked up the lantern. "You make sound — God."

The restless khe nosed one another, clawed the silver-sage, snuffled softly.

He turned the lantern off and heard the uneasy shuffle of their bodies. "God makes light. You say God!"

"Light!" a khe whimpered. The others took up its refrain, echoing it far back into the darkness. "Light! Light-that-moves!"

"No!" Johannes lurched to his feet. "God! God makes light!" He held the dark lantern above his head. "Say God!"

The khe crawled through the darkness to touch their noses to his feet, pull at his upraised arm. He could feel their distress like a deepening pool around him, black as the night, twice as bitter. "Say God!"

"God," one whistled brokenly, and then another, and another.

He turned the lantern on and let the cool white light flood down as the khe sat back on their haunches and stared. "God likes khe, all khe," he said, his heart pounding with elation. "God makes light for khe."

They were solemn and unmoving as he set the lantern down and reached for the lighter in his pocket. He needed more light, something bigger that would really impress them. He held the lighter to a wad of silver-moss packed around the edge of the wood and watched the stringy strands curl into flame.

As the wood caught fire, the khe began to whistle an eerie chorus that, as far as he could tell, held no meaning, just sound. The fire reached high into the sky, eating into the darkness. Much later, when the khe finally finished their song, they pressed forward. He held his arms out to them, overcome with the emotion of the moment. They knew God's name now, had finally recognized Him as the Creator of all things, after all these unnumbered millennia. At last the khe could take their place at God's feet, singing His praises with the rest of the universe.

"Light," a front beast whistled. "Tall one is light!" It charged Johannes and butted him into the bonfire.

He sprawled on his back, his arms still outstretched in welcome. His clothing smoldered as he scrambled out into the dirt and rolled. His eyes smarted from the smoke and the seared flesh on his back burned. He hunched over, coughing.

The khe backed away, their eyes trained reverently on his face. The logs shifted and sparks fainted outward as his heart sped into a new, feral rhythm that had nothing to do with Earth.

"Light!" The khe's muzzles wove back and forth as they crooned a new litany above the whip-crackle of the flames. "Tall one is light! God makes light! Tall one comes back!"

Johannes glanced back into the flames and seemed to see something, or rather someone, a body outlined in living fire, holding out a hand to him, its face, infinitely patient, topped by fiery hair and a firm mouth of red coals. His vision swam. "Father Gareth!" Waves of pain swept through his burned back and shoulders, and his tongue seemed three sizes too big. "What — ?"

The apparition swept its hand toward the waiting khe, its eyes flaming holes into another universe. *For now and all the rest of your days, you must tend these, God's children. Guard them well, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.*

"But — they don't understand!" Johannes sank to his knees. "And they never will. Their language is too primitive, their intelligence too different, too — limited, and there is nothing I or anyone else can do."

You have brought them this far, Father Gareth said in a spray of fiery red sparks. God never sets your hand to a task beyond your strength. You must try harder. There is a way, and you must try until you find it.

Johannes sat on the edge of the bed, dabbing cool antibiotic cream on his burns. Feverish thoughts raced through his head; the khe only understood what they could see and feel and smell, what could be presented before their stubby black noses, so the main impediment to their conversion was that the story of Christ's sacrifice was rooted in the past, nonexistent as far as the khe's eternal now was concerned. The story had to be brought forward and invested with meaning in the present to make it accessible.

The cream soothed his burns. He drank a glass of tepid water and stretched out on his side, thinking.... What had men known of salvation and redemption before Christ had come to show them the way? What would they know even now if He had not given His life for their sins?

It was a troubling question that had no answer.

Over the next months, he fell into the pattern of sleeping most of the day and then walking the night, either carrying the cold lantern, or building a bonfire when he could find enough wood. Each evening, as he emerged from the rectory, the khe greeted him with the same joyful words, "Tall one comes back!"

And he answered, "Yes, tall one always comes back." They gathered around the light to hear him painstakingly paraphrase another page or two of the Bible, rendering the verses in terms they might understand. They listened, neckfrills spread to the light, immobile as a legion of black statues until dawn. Though his strength steadily waned and his oxygen-starved body was often ill, he used his meager supply of medicines to doctor their minor injuries and ignored his own needs.

His lungs burned constantly now so that breathing was an effort. He coughed up blood and often woke from his fitful daytime sleep, gasping for air, knowing his abused body, unsupervised by consciousness, had simply abandoned the overwhelming struggle needed to keep on breathing.

But his mind refused to give up. He had so much more to accomplish. The khe were poised on the very edge of comprehension and faith; he sensed it. They could repeat a few of the translated verses now, and sometimes asked for certain stories they liked, such as Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac to the flames. What they needed at this point to transport them into a state of grace was no more or less than man had needed himself — a miracle, and though he earnestly prayed, he was well aware that miracles were not available upon demand.

On a fine, clear night somewhere in the twenty-fifth month of his posting, too weak to hike, he sat on his heels on the cold rocky soil, tending his bonfire and studying the stars, scattered like a handful of diamonds across the deep-purple sky. The khe had arranged themselves in surrounding rows, their green eyes reflecting the flames.

A persistent fever had dried his mouth and worsened his breathing until the effort to move or speak was almost beyond him. He tucked his chilled hands under his armpits and huddled over the ever-present hollow ache within, remembering Father Gareth in this same condition at the end, admitting finally to himself that he wasn't going to survive the twenty days left until the supply ship returned with his replacements. He

was going to die with this vital work left undone, then someone else would have to start all over again, would have to suffer the same failures and misunderstandings, perhaps never even succeed as far as he had himself. And all the time, there would be the khe, trapped outside the Kingdom of God, his responsibility and his failure, a final stain upon his soul.

He dragged himself to his feet and cast another armful of driftwood onto the fire. The effort send him into a coughing fit as the flames roared above his head, extravagant and wasteful. The khe whistled appreciatively at the size of the fire and edged closer. He turned and waited until the spasm had passed. "Tall one goes to its parent, to God."

"Goes?" a particularly large khe asked plaintively. "What parent? Where?"

Gravity seemed to shift ninety degrees. He fell to his knees and caught himself on his hands, his heart hammering as he threw all his will into the effort to draw another breath, and then another. "When tall one goes," he wheezed, fighting the terrible urge to cough, "the khe must remember the stories it has told of the other tall one who comes back."

The large khe blinked and tilted its head in what Johannes had come to recognize as a posture of uncertainty.

"Though this tall one must go," he said numbly, "the one who comes back never leaves. That tall one is always, always with the khe."

"Where?" The khe's head twisted. A whistle of distress rustled through the other beasts and they too craned their necks to see what wasn't there.

He sagged. It was not enough. Their minds were too literal, trapped in an ever-present now without the possibility of history or a future. They would never understand unless they saw the story played out before their very eyes. They had to experience Christ, had to touch the nail holes in his palms, see him die and then rise again as man had, but God had not seen fit to send His son to this forsaken place. Pain knifed through him and he felt a liquid bubbling deep within his lungs.

A smaller khe, barely half grown, broke from the ranks and scrambled up the rectory steps. "Tall one!" It scrabbled at the door. "One who makes light!"

Although khe could not recognize his face, it obviously still remembered when there had been more than one man here. Humans were

interchangeable, faceless units only notable in their usefulness. He meant nothing to them as an individual, and the new priests on their way would mean no more....

He stiffened, arms braced around his chest against the pain. Through the red haze behind his eyes, he sensed the glimmering of an understanding that had eluded him for months. Khe could not tell one human from another, and so, no matter how many individual priests came here over the years, in a sense they would all be Father Gareth, the tall one who comes back, a host of Christs risen from the tomb.

At last, he knew what to do and staggered to his feet. "Tall one goes to its parent now, to God," he rasped, "but comes back in twenty suns." He ran his fingers over the satiny hide of the nearest beast. It was warm and smooth, like the skin of a woman or a young child. He was surprised now that he had ever found it hideous. "The khe must watch for this one and greet it upon its return," he said, then was doubled over by a terrible fit of coughing. He gritted his teeth and waited for it to end.

"Tall one always comes back," he forced out finally. The khe stared at him, waiting as always, his spiritual children, on the brink of understanding. He made the sign of the cross over his chest, then lurched head-first into the bonfire before he could change his mind. For a second, the flames licked his clothing and boots and hair without effect. The khe's hot green eyes followed him.

It was all right, he told himself, as his cassock burst into ruddy flame. This was not suicide, but sacrifice, freely given in the oldest of ways, out of love. God understood. The stench of his burning flesh permeated the smoky air, then the burning wood collapsed under his weight, pitching him into the bed of red-hot coals.

"Light!" the khe chorused. "Tall one is light! Tall one comes back!"

And he would—in about twenty days, Johannes thought as a roaring crimson darkness swept him away. As long as men roamed the stars, tall one would always come back.



Michael Blumlein's last story to appear here was "Paul and Me" in our October issue. The following tale is a very different proposition entirely, a strange vision that draws upon Dr. Blumlein's work as a physician and puts a whole new spin on the notion of vengeance. Michael Blumlein lives in San Francisco and is currently working on his third novel (after *X, Y* and *The Movement of Mountains*.)

Revenge

By Michael Blumlein

THE BURIAL TOOK PLACE at Our Lady of Tears in Colma, and Luis stayed until the others had gone, until the diminutive grave was filled

and tamped with dirt and the gravediggers had shouldered their shovels and gone on to dig elsewhere. He stayed until he was alone, and so it was that he alone saw the child ascend. Barely a week old when she died, she looked slightly older now, a child of perhaps three months of age, driven by hunger and other primal urges and forced to look outside herself for help. Her eyes wandered this way and that, unfocused, it seemed, uncensoring, until at last they fixed on her father. She seemed to recognize him. Her face, which up to that moment had been a minor chaos of muscle contraction and relaxation, became still.

Luis was mesmerized. Emotion left him. He waited for her to speak.

She told him she had died too soon. She blamed the doctor. "The blood is on his hands, Father."

Luis believed the same. "What should I do?"

"Blood for blood," she said.

Luis nodded. This, too, he believed. "How?" he asked.

"Man to man. And do not wait too long. The sooner the better."

Luis, who had been floundering since her death, agreed. He was happy at last for a way to channel his grief, and with more hope than he had felt in many days, he rejoined his wife Rosa, who was being comforted by her family. At his arrival she took his hand, which was cold, and by that, and the look on his face, she knew immediately what was in his heart. Despairing, she beseeched him otherwise. She begged him, she kissed his hand, she pressed his palm to her heart. But Luis could not be moved. His hand stayed cold, and Rosa, foreseeing another tragedy, broke down in fresh tears. Dutifully, Luis took her in his arms. One of her sisters muttered a blessing. An aunt, wringing a tear-stained handkerchief, invoked the love of God. Someone keened.

A week later, Rosa tried to reason with her husband. "I have spoken with a lawyer," she told him after the boys were in bed. "He wants to meet with us."

"I have no interest in lawyers," replied Luis.

"He asks for no money. He just wants to talk."

"I have nothing to say."

"He wants to help us, Luis. He says there are grounds for a strong case."

"Grounds, he means, for him to get rich."

"He knows of another baby who died at this doctor's hands. We are not the first. The lawyer says the doctor could be charged with negligence."

"Rosa," said Luis. "Look at us. Who are we to accuse a doctor?"

"Not us. The lawyer. He would do the talking. He's a smart man, Luis. He asked questions that made me think. Questions, he said, they should have asked in the hospital. I trust him."

Luis was silent. He had no time for lawyers, no trust in anyone but himself. Man to man, she had said. An eye for an eye. It was his duty. On the other hand, he did not want to cause his wife unnecessary grief.

"Then go to him," he said. "Talk to this lawyer."

"Yes?"

"By all means. Please. We must do what is right."

Luis by nature was not a violent man. Before the death of his daughter, he was tender with his wife and gentle with his children. And even after, the violence he planned did not spill beyond its target. He didn't yell at the kids or bark at his wife, didn't lose his temper at work or with friends. If anything, he seemed more docile than usual, except to Rosa, who knew him best. She worried, but she also held out hope that with time his wounds would heal.

Luis owned a machete from his days as a field hand in Mexico. He had used it to cut wood, clear brush and on occasion kill a chicken for dinner. It had an ebony handle that he polished and a steel blade he kept sharp. Three weeks after his daughter's death, he left in the morning as usual, but instead of going to work, he drove to the medical building where Dr. Admonson had his obstetrics practice. He wore a white button-down shirt, pressed pants and cowboy boots. His hair was slicked down and parted, his mustache neatly trimmed. He carried the machete loosely in his left hand, drawing curious glances from passersby, none of whom took it upon himself to comment. At the medical building he rode the elevator to the third floor, where he exited with two youngish women and an elderly man. Dr. Admonson's office was at the end of the corridor on the left. The waiting room, whose pastel walls were hung with watercolors of flowers and idyllic landscapes, was full of women. Some were at term; some were just getting started; one or two suckled newborns. Luis was the only man in the room. He was also the only person carrying a machete.

He found an empty place on a couch next to a woman with a toddler in her lap and took a seat. A hush fell in the room as everyone took note of him. He stared at the floor. The toddler, drawn by the gleaming machete, squirmed away from her mother and went for the blade. Luis quickly blocked her way and shook his finger in remonstrance. An instant later, her mother snatched her back. A nurse in a starched white lab coat opened an interior door and called the name of a patient. The two of them disappeared inside, at which point Luis got up and tapped on the receptionist's frosted window. It slid open.

"May I help you?"

"I want to see the doctor."

The receptionist was a woman in her sixties with silver blue hair and glasses that magnified her eyes. She sat at a low desk from whose vantage point the machete was hidden.

"Are you here with someone?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"He delivered my baby. I want to talk to him."

She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and peered at Luis.
"Pertaining to what?"

"My baby," he repeated. "Maria Elena Hermosilla Rodriguez."

Dr. Admonson had a number of patients named Rodriguez, but the receptionist kept up with the mothers, not the babies. The name was not familiar to her. She looked at her appointment book.

"I have an opening tomorrow at two."

Luis stared at her blankly. He was not prepared to negotiate.

"Two tomorrow?" she repeated.

"Today," he said.

"We're very busy today."

This met with no reply, and the receptionist, a retired retail clerk with passing knowledge of the vagaries of human behavior, deemed it an inopportune time to persevere. She rechecked her book.

"All right. I'll try to squeeze you in. You'll have to wait though."

Luis nodded and returned to his seat. Several more patients were called by the nurse, while others entered the office to take their places. He was troubled. He loved women of all ages and types, but most of all, he loved women who were carrying new life. Pregnancy was a miracle and a sacrament to him, a time for women to be honored, protected and loved especially hard. How could he kill the doctor without creating panic among them? Even behind closed doors they would hear him hacking away, they would smell the blood and suffer. Then the burden of guilt would be on him.

The nurse appeared at her door and called his name. Slowly, he stood, machete in hand, hacking edge out, tip to the floor. He was caught between duty and love, between command and conscience. The nurse took a step toward him. He shrank back. She took another. She said his name.

He fled.

Two days later, at Mass, Maria Elena visited him again. She was dressed in Mary Janes and a pink crinoline skirt and wore a bow in her hair. She had some questions, chiefly why her father had not done what he had promised.

"I cannot kill a man like an animal," Luis replied with downcast eyes. "That would make me an animal too."

"An eye for an eye," said Maria Elena. "That was our agreement."

"I beg your forgiveness, little one, but I cannot."

She looked at him in such a way that he felt guilty of being less than a man. Then her expression changed.

"Another way perhaps."

Luis brightened. "Yes. Anything but cold-blooded murder."

"The doctors are smart. The doctors and the lawyers. Smart and powerful. We must be cunning. And patient. We must plan carefully."

This was a relief to Luis, who did not want a repeat of the debacle with the machete. The thought of what he had nearly inflicted on those innocent women filled him with shame.

"Do you have an idea?" he asked.

Maria Elena did, but she wasn't saying, not just yet. Instead, she gave him an enigmatic smile, and for a moment he got a glimpse of her as a young woman. She had an uncanny resemblance to someone he knew, and then it dawned on him that that someone was himself, that his daughter now looked just as he might have looked had he been born female. Long lashes, dark eyes, broad cheeks and lips. Hair the color of coal. Skin like clay. It was unsettling. The girl had something up her sleeve, and suddenly, he wasn't sure he wanted to know what.

He was sitting in a pew at the back of the church. From the pulpit the priest gave the call to prayer. Reflexively, Luis fell to his knees and clasped his hands together. Organ music filled the air, then the choir began to sing. Maria Elena joined in, her voice soulful and sweet. It eased her father's heart to hear her sing. Here especially, in the bosom of the Lord. What did he possibly have to fear?

A week later, he shaved his mustache and made an appointment to see the doctor. He gave his name as Luis Flores and neither the receptionist nor the nurse recognized him. He was ushered uneventfully into the

doctor's office, and fifteen minutes later, Dr. Admonson swept in. He was a rangy man in his early fifties with silver hair, liquid blue eyes and a disarming smile. He shook Luis's hand, glanced at his chart, which was blank, then sat opposite him at his desk.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Flores?"

Luis had rehearsed what to say, but the sight of the doctor unnerved him. Suddenly, he was back at the hospital, with all the attendant feelings of helplessness, panic and despair. Rosa's bag of waters had broken six weeks ahead of time, in itself not a terrible tragedy, except that labor had not followed. The baby could have been delivered by Caesarean section, but Dr. Admonson had said no, he wanted to give it as much time as possible to mature inside its mother, whom he put in the hospital at bedrest and visited daily, monitoring her for signs of infection or fetal distress. None occurred, and Rosa and Luis waited, a week, then two, then three. Their anxiety mounted, and repeatedly, they questioned the doctor about the wisdom of waiting so long. Repeatedly, he reassured them. And finally labor arrived, and the child was breech, and instead of doing a Caesarean section and bringing it out safely through Rosa's belly, Dr. Admonson, who decried unnecessary surgery, elected a vaginal delivery, during which the baby's head got stuck, so that forceps had to be used. Luis remembered the clink of metal as the blades were engaged, the beads of sweat on the doctor's forehead, his strained words behind the green surgical mask. And then the tugging of his daughter through the birth canal, the gentle but insistent pressure that had inadvertently broken her neck, so that instead of kicking and wailing at delivery, she had come out limp and blue. And then the bleeding on the brain that followed, and her being rushed to intensive care and put on a respirator and other machines to keep her alive. And how after a week — when she couldn't survive on her own — the machines were turned off, and she was allowed to die. And Rosa's tears, and from her breasts the rivers of warm milk. And his own tears, and his rage, and his vow of revenge.

Dr. Admonson bridged his fingers and awaited a reply to his question. It was rare but not unheard of that a man came to him alone, a husband without a wife, a beau without his belle, looking for advice. Often, like this man, they were shy. Usually this meant that the reason for coming

involved questions of fertility. What they thought of as their manhood. He tried again.

"What brings you in today, Mr. Flores?"

"I need help," Luis muttered, which was manifestly true. It was also what Maria Elena had told him to say.

"In what way?" Admonson asked.

Luis stared into his hands. The plan, such as it was, had been to ask for help and then to receive it, in this way insinuating himself, however tangentially, into the doctor's life, thus buying time to plot his revenge. The plan's weakness was that, beyond this vague request for help, he had nothing more to say.

"Mr. Flores?"

Luis attempted to elaborate. "I need a doctor."

"Of course. But as you must be aware, I am an obstetrician. On occasion, a gynecologist. This means I take care of women. Is there a woman involved somehow in this? A problem at home? Elsewhere? I have no moral agenda, Mr. Flores, and frankly, there are few things that either surprise or offend me. But you have to help out. You have to speak your mind."

Luis shrank from the doctor's ease of delivery, his fluid command of the situation. His purpose in coming, ill-defined to begin with, drained from him completely. He felt as he had as an immigrant boy fresh from the farm, when the English-speaking school teacher had upbraided him in a language he did not understand. His mind went blank. He picked at a piece of skin in his palm and at length muttered an apology and got up to go. He looked for his hat, but he had left it at home. What could he have been thinking, he wondered, to have come without his hat?

To his surprise, Maria Elena was not cross. She understood how lacking he was in cunning, how disinclined to subterfuge and deception. Patiently, she worked with him, built up his courage, rehearsed what to say. When in these practice sessions he faltered, she reminded him of the doctor's offense, appealing to his pride and sense of justice. For maximum effect, she sometimes appeared to him as she had at the moment of her birth, head grotesquely ballooned with blood, body limp as a rag. At other times she used a different tactic, coming to him as a girl, or a young woman, splendid in appearance, vivacious and full of promise. In this way

she reminded him what had been cut short. The flower that had been denied its bloom. She was diligent in fanning the flames of his deprivation and discontent.

Two weeks later, wearing a bolo tie and white cowboy shirt with mother-of-pearl snaps, Luis returned to the doctor. He apologized for his previous behavior. He admitted it was not easy saying what he had come to say.

"And what is that?"

"I want you to be my doctor."

Admonson regarded him. "But why?"

Luis faltered.

Admonson became impatient. "I don't see how I can."

"By saying yes."

"And what will I do for you? What is it that you need?"

It was a difficult question, and Luis waited for Maria Elena's help, which she had promised. Moments later, she materialized, wearing a peasant blouse embroidered with finches and other colorful birds. Her hair was wound in a thick braid and her face painted with makeup. She slid behind him on the chair and eased him forward, until he was perched on the edge. She pushed his knees together in a feminine way and folded his hands demurely in his lap. She bowed his head ever so slightly, in deference to the doctor's position of superiority. She added a faint sibilance to his voice.

"I put myself in your hands, Doctor."

It didn't take a genius to get the message. Nor, once it registered, was it hard to understand why the man insisted on being so vague and indirect. Admonson chided himself. He took pride in his ability to read people, and it irked him when he couldn't. He had been misled by the man's attire, his cowboy boots and starched shirts. By his calloused hands and yes, his Mexican background. The only men posing as women he had ever seen, and these from a distance, were white and anything but shy. He asked if Luis had spoken with anyone else regarding this matter.

"No, Doctor."

"There are specialty clinics, you know. People with more experience than I have. To tell the truth, I have none at all. You would be my first, my only, patient."

Luis inclined his head to signify he took this as a compliment.

"I really shouldn't," said Admonson, who was, despite himself, intrigued. "Apart from a basic standard of care, it's a question of common sense. Simply put, you'd be better served by an expert in the field."

"Please, Doctor."

Admonson resisted. "I could give you a referral."

Flatter him, whispered Maria Elena. Appeal to his skill. His reputation.

"You know how to treat women," said Luis. "You're the best there is. Everyone says."

Admonson demurred.

Luis insisted. "I beg of you."

"I couldn't," said Admonson.

Tell him the truth, Maria Elena enjoined. That your fate is in his hands.

"My fate is in your hands," said Luis.

"I hardly believe that," replied Admonson, flattered nonetheless.

Luis inclined his head, gave a chesty sigh and slowly stood, striking a posture midway between disappointment and defeat. "I am sorry then. I should not have come. I should not have bothered you."

He turned to go and had his hand on the door, when Admonson called him back.

"If I consent to be your doctor in this, I'll need your full cooperation. You understand that."

"Yes, Doctor."

"And you're willing to accept the risks. Psychological, emotional, physical. Whatever. You'll sign a document to that effect."

"Yes."

Admonson weighed the situation one last time. Something didn't seem quite right, but he was not one to back down from a challenge. He could always change his mind later.

"All right. You're willing, I'm willing." He motioned to the chair Luis had recently vacated. "Have a seat. We might as well get started."

Thereafter, his questions became blunt and sexually explicit. Luis's cheeks burned with embarrassment, and he would have run from the room had Maria Elena not been there to help out. She did the talking; it

was shocking some of the things she said. But she made no apology. It was necessary, she told her father. If he wanted his revenge, this was the way.

And so it was that Luis Flores, formerly Rodriguez, began his daily doses of estrogen, putting his trust in the hands of the man whose hands had caused his greatest grief. Maria Elena appeared frequently the first few months of his treatment to encourage him and insure he kept his appointments with Dr. Admonson for his monthly injections. She was with him when, at the doctor's insistence, he took the battery of psychological tests to determine his personality profile, his mental stability and adjustment potential. She helped him brave the furtive curiosity of the pharmacist who dispensed his medication, and she stayed with him through the bouts of nausea caused by the pills. She did not explain the specifics of her plan for revenge. She had, in fact, little at all to say about the future. When Luis asked, she was either vague or else told him to be patient, so that eventually he stopped asking. He gave himself up to the treatments and did what he could to ingratiate himself to Admonson. As time passed, Maria Elena came less often, until, at length, for reasons known only to herself, she stopped her visits altogether.

Not long after, Rosa came across his bottle of pills. She had done the laundry and was piling his underwear in the top drawer of the bureau when she felt something in the toe of one of his socks. Normally, she would not have given in to curiosity, but under the circumstances, which included an increasingly moody and uncommunicative husband and a marriage on the verge of collapse, she felt justified in investigating. The bottle, which had no label, was half full. The pills were small, oval and white, with a line down the center and a number embossed above the line. She recognized them as the same pills her mother had been taking ever since her ovaries and womb had been removed. This puzzled and alarmed her.

That night, after the children were in bed, she confronted her husband. She accused him of having an extra-marital affair, which the pills were somehow connected to. She lost her temper and screamed at him. This was most unusual.

Humiliated at being discovered and stung by her accusation of infidelity, Luis was speechless. He had not considered the effect of his clandestine behavior on his wife, had not thought of much else but his own wounds since his daughter's death. He had never intended to hurt

anyone but the doctor. Certainly not Rosa. If anything, he had assumed that her suffering, like his, would be placated by revenge. Once the shock of her accusation passed, he vehemently denied having an affair. Lamely, he tried pretending the pills were for someone else. This only made matters worse, so that finally, he told his wife the truth. The pills were his. Then he told a lie.

"They're an aphrodisiac."

Rosa found this hard to believe.

"I want another child," he said.

She frowned. "You've hardly touched me since the tragedy. It's hard to make babies without touching."

His mind had been full of other things, he wanted to say, but he was afraid to tell her what. So he said nothing.

"You blame me for her death," said Rosa.

"No. I blame the doctor." He hesitated. "Forgive me, but sometimes I also blame God."

Rosa was not surprised. "I worry for you, Luis. In church I pray for your bitterness to end."

"I pray also," he said.

"For what do you pray?"

He looked down.

"I am your wife," Rosa reminded him. "Please, show me your face."

With an effort Luis lifted his head and met her eyes. They were dark and steady and inviting of trust. The eyes of a woman, he thought, the eyes of a mother. He wanted to be like her, worthy of trust. Like the women he had sat with in the doctor's waiting room. New mothers, expectant mothers, women inextricably bound to life.

"I pray for another chance," he said.

Rosa was touched, and her face softened. Then something came over her. Rarely the initiator in matters of sex for fear of offending her husband's manhood, she cast fear aside and reached out and touched Luis's cheek with her fingertips. She stroked his skin, the wings of his nose, his lips. He responded by kissing her palm, then embracing her. It was their first such contact in weeks, and the joy of it kept them from letting go, until finally Luis freed an arm to turn off the light. He was anxious to put his wife's mind at ease, eager to show his love further.

Fleetingly, it crossed his mind that, hope beyond hope, they might even conceive a child.

High hope, deep despair. When the time came, he could not harden enough to enter Rosa, much less plant the seed. They tried one thing after another, they sweated and toiled, but success eluded them, and finally, they gave up. It was an embarrassment to both of them, an admission of troubles deeper than they imagined. It was a long time before they tried again.

In the months that followed other changes befell their relationship. As his breasts swelled, Luis took to dressing and undressing in private, so that Rosa would not see. Once or twice a week he took a pill he had gotten from the doctor to get rid of the excess water and feeling of bloatedness the hormones caused. On these days he was in and out of the bathroom so many times at work that his boss started to complain. Fearful for his job, Luis took to taking the pills at night, so that instead of missing time at work, he missed sleep. This made him cantankerous and moody. He became subject to fits of temper, and once, to the fear and amazement of his wife and children, he actually broke down in tears. When he recounted this embarrassing episode to Admonson, who was, ironically, the only person in this time of distress he felt capable of confiding in, the doctor explained that it was probably the medicine at work. Women were often temperamental when their hormones were surging.

"Am I a woman now?" asked Luis, displaying a naiveté that worried Admonson.

"No," he replied. "You're a man on hormones. You're far from being a woman."

Luis wasn't so sure. If he were a man, he would have killed this so-called doctor long ago.

"Am I a homosexual?" he asked.

Admonson regarded him. "What do you think you are?"

"I'm following orders."

"Not mine," Admonson was quick to reply.

Luis would not meet his eyes.

"I'm getting a funny feeling here," Admonson said. "Like you're not sure about the way things are going. You're not happy. Maybe we should put things on hold for right now."

"On hold?"

"Stop the medicine. Re-think what we're doing here."

"I'm doing what I'm supposed to," replied Luis.

"You said you're following orders. Whose?"

Luis scolded himself for saying too much. This doctor was cagey. He made you think you could trust him, made you almost like him, then he turned the tables, killing your baby, betraying your trust. A person had to be careful.

"My orders," said Luis. "I'm doing this for myself."

"That's the way it has to be. It has to come from you. From inside. It has to be what you want. What you truly think you are."

Admonson was winging it. By rights he shouldn't have taken the case at all, but curiosity had pushed his hand and now vanity kept him from letting go. He had done some reading and talked to a few colleagues. As long as the treatment was merely a matter of prescribing hormones, it was reversible and relatively safe. He hadn't decided what he would do once they tackled the issue of surgery. As a physician he was as well-acquainted as anyone with the subtleties of the female form, but he had absolutely no experience at all in molding that form from one of the opposite sex. The knowledge of what he would have to cut was actually rather unsettling. He asked Luis if he had given any thought to the matter.

Crafty, thought Luis. Trying to scare me off. He sensed the doctor's trepidation, which made him glad.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm burning up," he said, thinking the news of this might worry the doctor further. "Like there's a fire in my skin. A fever."

"Hot flashes," said Admonson.

Luis frowned.

"The hormones," he explained. "I did warn you."

"I don't like it."

"What's to like? No one said it was easy becoming a woman. Maybe if you grew your hair long. Learned to use a little makeup. A little lipstick." He reached for a framed photograph that sat on the corner of his desk and held it out to Luis. "My wife. She spends half an hour every morning at the mirror. And again in the evening, if we're going out. It's work being a woman. It takes commitment." He paused, grinned. "But then if you're lucky, you get a man like me."

Luis felt simultaneously humiliated and confused. For want of a reply he looked at the photograph of Admonson's wife, a delicately boned, elegant-looking woman in her forties. He wondered what she did to stand up to her husband. And, conversely, what attracted her to him.

"I have no wish to get a man," he said quietly.

Admonson pondered this, shrugged. "No. Of course not. You're married." He took back the picture. "My wife and I have been together twenty-two years. She's a real trooper. A diamond in the rough. Don't know what I'd do without her." He glanced at Luis. "You haven't spoken of your own wife lately. What does she make of all this?"

Luis stiffened. The thought of Rosa made him defensive. "There are no arguments in our family. Whatever I am, I am still the head of the house."

"It's a man's world," agreed Admonson. "Are you sure you want to give it up?"

Luis had never considered it. True, his thirst for revenge had been hottest early on, before he had begun his treatments. He had changed, was changing, but whatever he ultimately became, he expected to be able to call back his former self on demand.

"I give up nothing," he said.

"Ah. A feminist."

Luis frowned. "Women are the salt of the earth. The ones who love. I don't understand you. How can a doctor of women not like women?"

"I have great respect for women," replied Admonson. "I'm not sure I could ever get through labor as they do. Or have children cling like little monkeys to my breast. Or suffer mood swings every month when I'm about to menstruate." He shook his head at the marvel of it all. "Women are amazing creations. They deserve all the credit in the world. They wake me at night, they get me going in the morning, I'm with them all day. My life revolves around women. How can I not like them?"

He returned his wife's photograph to its spot on his desk, then added, "And they pay the bills. What more could a man ask?"

Luis churned inside. He was no match for this doctor, who parried and twisted everything he said. Revenge, it was clear, would not come in the form of words. He stood up.

"I'll take my shot now."

"Of course." Admonson, ever the gentleman, left his chair and extended his hand. "It's been good chatting. And don't worry. We'll take this thing one step at a time. I'll see you in a month."

THAT NIGHT Luis had a dream. A nightmare rather, against which he fought and flailed, twisting the sheets, throwing off the pillow, straining the plastic buttons on his pajama top until, stretched to the breaking point, they popped off. When he woke, drenched in sweat, the overhead light in the bedroom was on, because Rosa, hearing him cry out, had feared that something was wrong. Upon seeing his naked torso, with the rounded breasts and pink nipples of a young woman, she knew that she was right. She had let things go on too long. Her husband had passed beyond help, at least beyond hers. She muttered a prayer, crossed herself and spent the remainder of the night on the living room couch. The following morning, children in tow, she moved out.

Luis was grief-stricken and full of remorse. He vowed to stop the treatments. But each time he tried, he failed. On three separate occasions he made a point of tossing the bottle of pills in the garbage only to find them back in his sock, or in his hand, a fresh tablet on his tongue, or tumbling down his throat to his stomach to work its magic. He called to cancel his monthly doctor's appointment, but when the receptionist came on, the line inexplicably went dead. He called again and did cancel, but when the day came, he went anyway. He was in the grip of something he couldn't control, and he suspected his daughter's hand in it, even though it had been months since she had bothered to pay a visit. He wondered where it was all leading. More than anything, he prayed that it would soon end.

Three days after leaving, Rosa returned to the apartment to pick up some clothes, expecting her husband to be at work. But, bereft at his family's departure, Luis had called in sick. The meeting between them was awkward in the extreme. Rosa tried to get in and out without talking, but, driven to the brink by her husband's relentless apologies and entreaties to return, she lost control, bursting out in a torrent of questions, none of which he was able to answer to her satisfaction. Was he sick? she asked. No, he replied, not sick. Crazy? No, not crazy either. He was afraid to tell

her about Maria Elena, not because she wouldn't believe the child might visit but because she wouldn't believe she would be so cruel and ruthless as to orchestrate her own revenge. Rosa would assume he was either lying or possessed; so he said nothing.

Given so little to work with, Rosa had little choice. If Luis wasn't willing to trust her, she couldn't very well trust him. She needed to look out for herself and the children, and thus stood firm in her decision to separate. It was, she felt, her duty as a mother.

Luis was heartbroken, though he couldn't honestly blame her. He shared his wife's belief in motherhood as a sacred trust, and he made her promise to keep herself and the children safe. For his part he promised that all the trouble would soon be over. This made Rosa cry, and Luis hugged her. I love you, he murmured. She squeezed him. I love you too.

He insisted she and the children have the apartment. He would find something else, a room somewhere, a studio. When the dust settled a little, they would talk again.

He took a room in a cheap hotel and a week later moved to a flat occupied by a practical-minded widow from Guadalajara who shared a bedroom with her mother and disabled daughter and rented out two others to make ends meet. Luis got a clean room with a bureau, a wooden armchair, a throw rug and a window overlooking an alley. Across the hall from him was the other boarder, a laconic Salvadorean gentleman in his sixties, who liked to drink alone. Relationships in the household were cordial but circumscribed. Luis left early for work, returned late and kept to himself. He sent the bulk of his paycheck to Rosa. What little he had left went to the doctor, the medication and the occasional thrift-store shirt or sweater to accommodate his new shape. For fear of running into Rosa and the children he stopped going to church, although he continued to pray, sometimes feverishly, in his room. He had not seen Maria Elena for months and worried that she had forsaken him. He longed for her reassurance and sense of purpose. Her wits and determination. He prayed that she return, and at the same time he prayed for Rosa, whom he missed dearly, and for the children, whom he loved beyond measure. And he prayed for himself, because, of everyone, he needed it most of all.

As the anniversary of Maria Elena's death approached, he started to unravel. The rage and sorrow and despair he had kept inside seemed all to

bubble up at once. He missed work. He holed up in his room. When the date came for his monthly visit to the doctor, it was all he could do to struggle into some clothes and get out the door.

Admonson seemed pleased to see him. He asked if there was anything new to report.

"I'm being poisoned," said Luis.

Admonson became instantly alert. "What do you mean?"

"I'm suffering. She has left me. She must think I am worthless. Beneath contempt. Yet I do this for her."

"For whom?"

"My daughter. My beloved Maria Elena." He fingered the wooden cross he had taken to wearing around his neck.

Admonson did not conceal his alarm. "What daughter? What poison?"

Luis felt close to bursting. There was a letter opener on the doctor's desk. He could kill him now. Kill him, then kill himself. Be done with it.

A voice suggested he hold off a minute.

Luis almost wept with relief. It was Maria Elena, and though he couldn't see her, he knew she was close by. Leave the doctor, she said. Leave him now and come to me. The time has arrived. Come to me.

Luis trembled with joy. Without another word he fled the doctor's office, fled the waiting room full of mothers and infants, fled the medical building and headed for the streets. All that day and all the next the voice followed him. It called to him in the wind off the hills and the steam rising from sidewalk grates, in the electric buzz of trolley wires and the squeal of car brakes. It sang to him in the hiss of his shower and the flush of his toilet, in the fog and rain and rising sun. He listened in rapture, he who had been so forlorn. He begged to see her face.

But Maria Elena chose not to show herself. Instead, she kept repeating the same half-dozen words over and over, until Luis grabbed his ears and cried for her to stop. She did not, and this made him angry. He scolded her, father to daughter, occasioning his landlady, who happened to be nearby, to ask who he was talking to.

"Maria Elena," he replied.

She cocked an eye.

"My dead daughter," he explained.

The woman crossed herself and went away, but the next day, with apologies for the inconvenience, gave Luis his notice. Two days later he was out on the street and driven to distraction by his daughter's relentless chatter. Her words had ceased being words, and the drone had become impossible to bear. In desperation he made his way to his old apartment, arriving at the door just as Rosa was on the way out. She was dressed in black.

"I was wondering if you'd come," she said.

"Forgive me. I'm half crazy. I could think of nowhere else."

"Do you need a ride?"

"I need help."

This she could believe, and though her husband's urgent manner and disheveled appearance made her wary, she was not dead in the heart. She took his arm. "Come. We'll go together."

It was the anniversary of their daughter's death. Rosa drove to the cemetery, where they were joined by other members of the family, including their two sons, who came with an aunt. Luis wept to see them again, wept to see Rosa, wept anew when the prayer for Maria Elena was given. The girl stopped chattering long enough for him to hear. The force of her silence was overwhelming. He felt light as a cloud. When the prayer ended, she appeared to him for the last time.

She came as a mature woman and exuded a sense of contentment and imminent satisfaction. Luis could not understand why. Apart from a year of waiting, he had done nothing to avenge her death. At best, he had only marginally insinuated himself into the doctor's life, and to what effect? The doctor was not suffering. Far from it. He seemed to have the upper hand at every visit.

It was August, and a fog-driven wind cut through Luis's clothing. He hugged himself and blew into his hands, but the chill, like a tide, crept inward. Like something from the grave, it made him tremble. The feeling of weightlessness vanished. Suddenly, he was cold. And frightened. He thought his time had come to die.

Maria Elena hovered a foot or two above the grave. Her feet were planted in air, her legs slightly spread, her arms akimbo. Her expression was resolute, yet there was a certain playfulness in her eyes.

The wind picked up, tossing Luis's hair across his face. He heard

laughter, then noticed that a bird now perched on Maria Elena's outstretched finger. A sparrow. In its beak it held a seed.

Maria Elena had hair the color of coal. Eyes that matched the polished ebony of her father's machete. Lips the flesh of saints. When she smiled, her face burst to life and the sparrow took flight, circling once in a halo around her head and once around the grave. Then, straight as an arrow, it headed for Luis.

Afterwards, he would remember a parting kiss. An inner quickening. A warmth. The bird vanished inside him, and moments later his precious daughter, his treasure, Maria Elena Hermosilla Rodriguez, was gone.

THEY NAMED her Angelica. At her birth nine months later Dr. Admonson used a modified Caesarean section. Perhaps this was because he had been chastened by past failures with natural childbirth. Perhaps because, despite an exhaustive search, he had failed to locate the mother's vagina. Whatever the reason, he exercised the physician's prerogative to usurp Mother Nature in favor of a surgical delivery. The C-section served another purpose as well: it allowed him to look inside Luis to see just what the hell was going on.

What he saw was not so different from what he always saw: a term infant attached by a cord and placenta to a source of nutrition, in this case the blood-engorged wall of Luis's lower intestine. After removing the baby and severing the cord, he took a sample of the attachment site for further study. He looked around for anything else out of the ordinary and finding nothing, sewed his patient up. Then he went to talk to the press.

Rosa, who was not present at the birth, met her husband and new daughter in the recovery room. Luis's impregnation, which to many had come as a shock and embarrassment, was to her a miracle, the answer, if slightly outlandish, to her prayers. She was as thrilled as any new parent. More, perhaps, because she had just landed a new job she would have hated to leave, even for a month or two. Now she wouldn't have to, and at the same time she could have the joy of a new face, a new spirit in the family. It was as close to Heaven in mortal flesh as she could imagine. She felt deeply blessed.

Luis was still recovering from the anesthetic when she entered the room. He didn't completely recognize her, but she kissed him anyway and

held his hand while he slept. The baby was wrapped in a flannel receiving blanket and tucked in a bassinet next to his bed. When she started to cry, Rosa instinctively picked her up. She cradled her in her arms and held her to her chest, but the child's wailing only grew louder. Finally, Luis opened his eyes. He motioned to his wife.

"Give her to me," he said feebly.

Rosa complied. "She's hungry."

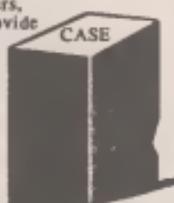
Luis pulled his gown aside and placed the child at his breast. She rooted a few moments before latching on. Luis felt an instant of pain, then the milk started to flow. It was an incredible sensation. He thought of all the things that might have happened, all the things that did. Who was he, he wondered, to deserve such a miracle? The Devil had been inside him. Now the Devil had turned to light.

He transferred the baby to his other breast, where she promptly fell asleep. Luis soon followed, and what he dreamed did not remember, and when he woke was ravenous, and ate a meal that was quite enough, said the astonished nurse, for two grown people, or even, God forbid, three. ☐

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

BOOM AND ZOOM

THE WORLD Wide Web is a mesh growing faster than exponentially. Where will it lead?

Consider computerized offices, which were supposed to give us "paper-free" work, but somehow have not. I suspect there's merely a lag effect operating, though. Paper prices jumped last year and over the long haul, as demand rises and supply does not, will continue to climb. There isn't very much land left for forest-farming. The United States already dominates the world market, and in fact the country is more forested now than it was half a century ago, despite doubling its population in that time. But even we are feeling the pinch.

I suspect that the urge to get hard copy, despite having everything on backed-up disks, will fade in time. The working office will

attain a cleaner, swifter look. The slow trend toward working at home (where I'm writing this) rather than trudging to the office will accelerate.

But these are humdrum, predictable facets. What will it *feel* like to work in a completely computer-sifted world?

Of course, if you're doing manual labor or a skilled craft, not much can change. But for many of us, the future could be qualitatively different.

Envisioning this is not a matter for futurists, who typically express themselves in glossy generalities. Science fiction does it better than any other discourse. Making the reader live through a possible world is far better than dry theory.

So in thinking about this column, I decided to write a scenario to convey my speculations. To

ground it I set the action where I live, in Orange County, California. Commonly thought to be conservative, in fact it is more libertarian in tone, with communities ranging from the button-down conservative Orange to the artistic Laguna Beach. The growing technological complex near my university, UC Irvine, is the biggest in the state after famous Silicon Valley, with a focus on both computers and biotech. How might this hotbed of progress develop?

Gingerly she climbed into her yawning work pod. It always reminded her of an immense, leering mouth.

The Colombian coffee was barely getting her going. A warning light winked: her Foe was already up and running. Another day at the orifice.

The pod wrapped itself around her as tabs and inserts slid into place. This was the latest gear, a top of the line simulation suit immersed in a data-pod of beguiling comfort.

Snug. Not a way to lounge, but to *fly*.

She closed her eyes and let the sim-suit do its stuff.

May 16, 2026. She liked to start in real-space. Less jarring.

Images played directly upon her retina. The entrance protocol lifted

her out of her Huntington Beach apartment and in a second she was zooming over rooftops, skating down the beach. Combers broke in soft white bands and red-suited surfers caught them in passing marriage.

All piped down from a satellite view, of course, sharp and clear.

Get to work, Myung, her Foe called. *Sightsee later*.

"I'm running a deep search," she lied.

Sure.

"I'll spot you a hundred creds on the action," she shot back.

You're on. Big new market opening today. A hint of mockery?

"Where?" Today she was going to nail him, by God.

Right under our noses, the way I sniff it.

"In the county?"

Now, that would be telling.

Which meant he didn't know.

So: a hunt. Better than a day of shaving margins, at least.

She and her Foe were zoomers, ferrets who made markets more efficient. Evolved far beyond the primitivo commodity traders of the late TwenCen, they moved fast, high-flying for competitive edge.

They zoomed through spaces wholly insubstantial, but that was irrelevant. Economic pattern-spaces

were as tricky as mountain crevasses. And even hard cash just stood for an idea.

Most people still dug coal and grew crops, ancient style grunt labor — but in Orange County you could easily forget that, gripped by the fever of the new.

Below her, the county was a sprawl, but a smart one. The wall-to-mall fungus left over from the TwenCen days was gone. High-rises rose from lush parks. Some even had orange grove skirts, a chic nostalgia. Roofs were eco-virtue white. Blacktop streets had long ago added a sandy-colored coating whose mica sprinkles winked up at her. Even cars were in light shades. All this to reflect sunlight, public advertisements that everybody was doing something about global warming.

The car-rivers thronged streets and freeways (still *free* — if you could get the license). When parked, cars were tucked underground. Still plenty of scurry-scurry, but most of it mental, not metal.

She sensed the county's incessant pulse, the throb of the Pacific Basin's hub, pivot point of the largest zonal economy on the planet.

Felt, not saw. Her chest was a map. Laguna Beach over her right nipple, Irvine over the left. Using neural plasticity, the primary sep-

sory areas of her cortex "read" the county's electronic Mesh through her skin.

But this was not like antique, serial reading at all. No flat data here. No screens.

She relaxed. The trick was to merge, not just observe.

Far better for a chimpanzee-like species to take in the world through its evolved, body-wrapping neural bed.

More fun, too. She detected economic indicators on her augmented skin. A tiny shooting pain spoke of a leveraged buyout. Was that uneasy sensation natural to her, or a hint from her subsystems about a possible lowering of the prime rate?

Gotcha! the Foe sent.

Myung glanced at her running index. She was eleven hundred creds down!

So fast? How could — ?

Then she felt it: dancing data-spikes in alarm-red, prickly on her left leg. The Foe had captured an early indicator. Which?

Myung had been coasting toward the Anaheim hills, watching the pulse of business trading quicken as slanting sunshine smartly profiled the fashionable, post-pyramidal corporate buildings. So she had missed the opening salvo

of weather data update, the first trading opportunity.

The Foe already had an edge and was shifting investments. How?

Ahead of her in the simulated air she could see the Foe skating to the south. All this was visual metaphor, of course, symbology for the directed attention of the data-eating programs.

A stain came spreading from the east into Mission Viejo. Not real weather, but economic variables.

Deals flickered beneath the data-thunderheads like sheet lightning. Pixels of packet-information fell as soft rains on her long-term investments.

The Foe was buying extra electrical power from Oxnard. Selling it to users to offset the low yields seeping up from San Diego.

Small stuff. A screen for something subtle. Myung close-upped the digital stream and glimpsed the deeper details.

Every day more water flowed in the air over southern California than streamed down the Mississippi. Rainfall projections changed driving conditions, affected tournament golf scores, altered yields of solar power, fed into agri-prod.

Down her back slid prickly-fresh commodity info, an itch she

should scratch. A hint from her sniffer-programs? She willed a virtual finger to rub the tingling.

— and snapped back to real-space.

An ivory mist over Long Beach. Real, purpling water thunderclouds scooting into San Juan Cap from the south.

Ah — virtual sports. The older the population got, the more leery of weather. They still wanted the zing of adventure, though. Through virtual feedback, creaky bodies could air-surf from twenty kilometers above the Grand Canyon. Or race alongside the few protected Great White sharks in the Catalina Preserve.

High-resolution Virtuality stimulated lacy filigrees of electro-chem impulses throughout the cerebral cortex. Did it matter whether the induction came from the real thing or from the slippery arts of electronics?

Time for a bit of business.

Her prognosticator programs told her that with 0.87 probability, such oldies would cocoon-up across six states. So indoor virtual sports use, with electro-stim to zing the aging muscles, would rise in the next day.

She swiftly exercised options on five virtual sites, pouring in some

of her reserve computational capacity. But the Foe had already harvested the plums there. Not much margin left.

Myung killed her simulated velocity and saw the layers of deals the Foe was making, counting on the coming storm to shift the odds by fractions. Enough contracts-of-the-moment processed, and profits added up. But you had to call the slant just right.

Trouble-sniffing subroutines pressed their electronic doubts upon her: a warning chill breeze across her brow. She waved it away.

Myung dove into the clouds of event-space. Her skin did the deals for her, working with software that verged on mammal-level intelligence itself. She wore her suits of artificial-intelligence...and in a real sense, they wore her.

She felt her creds — not credits so much as *credibilities*, the operant currency in data-space — washing like hot air currents over her body.

Losses were chilling. She got cold feet, quite literally, when the San Onofre nuke piped up with a gush of clean power. A new substation, coming on much earlier than SoCalEd had estimated.

That endangered her energy portfolio. A quick flick got her out

of the electrical futures market altogether, before the world-wide Mesh caught on to the implications.

Up, away. Let the Foe pick up the last few percentage points. Myung flapped across the digital sky, capital taking wing.

She lofted to a ten-mile-high perspective. Global warming had already made the county's south-facing slopes into cactus and tough grasslands. Coastal sage still clung to the north-facing slopes, seeking cooler climes. All the coast was becoming a "fog desert" sustained by vapor from lukewarm ocean currents. Dikes held back the rising warm ocean from Newport to Long Beach.

Pretty, but no commodity possibilities there anymore.

Time to take the larger view.

She rose. Her tactile and visual maps expanded. She went to split-skin perception, with the real, matter-based landscape overlaid on the info-scape. Surreal, but heady.

From below she burst into the data-sphere of Invest-tainment, where people played upon the world's weather like a casino. Ever since rising global temperatures pumped more energy in, violent oscillations had grown.

Weather was now the hidden, wild-card lubricant of the world's

economy. Tornado warnings were sent to street addresses, damage predictions shaded by the city block. Each neighborhood got its own rain forecast.

A sparrow's fall in Portugal could diddle the global fluid system so that, in principle, a thunderhead system would form over Fountain Valley a week later. Today, merging pressures from the south sent forking lightning over mid-California. That shut down the launch site of all local rocket-planes to the Orbital Hiltons. Hundreds of invest-programs had that already covered.

So she looked on a still larger scale. Up, again.

This grand world Mesh was *N*-dimensional. And even the number *N* changed with time, as parameters shifted in and out of application.

There was only one way to make sense of this in the narrow human sensorium. Every second, a fresh dimension sheared in over an older dimension. Freeze-framed, each instant looked like a ridiculously complicated abstract sculpture running on drug-driven overdrive. Watch any one moment too hard and you got a lancing headache, motion sickness and zero comprehension.

Augmented feedback, so use-

ful in keeping on the financial edge, could also be an unforgiving bitch.

The Foe wasn't up here, hovering over the whole continent. Good. Time to think. She watched the *N*-space as if it were an entertainment, and in time came an extended perception, integrated by the long-suffering subconscious.

She bestrode the world. Total immersion.

She stamped and marched across the muddy field of chaotic economic interactions. Her boot heels left deep scars. These healed immediately: sub-programs at work, like cellular repair. She would pay a passage price for venturing here.

A landscape opened like the welcome of a mother's lap.

Her fractal tentacles spread through the networks with blinding speed, penetrating the planetary spiderweb. Orange County was a brooding, swollen orb at the PacBasin's center.

Smelled it yet? came the Foe's taunt from below.

"I'm following some ticklers," she lied.

I'm 'way ahead of you.

"Then how come you're gabbing? And tracking me?"

Friendly competition —

"Forget the friendly part." She

was irked. Not by the Foe, but by failure. She needed something hot. Where?

'Fess up, you're smelling nothing.

"Just the stink of over-done expectations," she shot back wryly.

Nothing promising in the swirling weather-space, working with prickly light below her. Seen this way, the planet's thirteen billion lives were like a field of grass waving beneath fitful gusts they could barely glimpse.

Wrong blind alley! sent her Foe maliciously.

Myung shot a glance at her indices. Down nineteen hundred!

And she had spotted him a hundred. Damn.

She shifted through parameter-spaces. There — like a carnival, neon-bright on the horizon of a black, cool desert: the colossal market-space of Culture.

She strode across the tortured seethe of global Mesh data.

In the archaic economy of manufacturing, middle managers were long gone. No more "just in time" manufacturing in blocky factories. No more one-size-fits-all. That had fallen to "right on time" production out of tiny shops, pre-fabs, even garages.

Anybody who could make a

gizmo cheaper could send you a bid. They would make your very own custom gizmo, by direct Mesh order.

Around the globe, robotic prod-lines of canny intelligence stood ready in ill-lit shacks. Savvy software leaped into action at your Meshed demand, reconfiguring for your order like an obliging whore. Friction-free service. The mercantile millennium.

Seen from up here, friction-free marketism seemed the world's only workable ideology — unless you counted New Islam, but who did? Under it, middle managers had decades ago vanished down the sucking drain of evolving necessity. "Production" got shortened to *prod* — and prodded the market.

Of course the people shed by frictionless *prod* ended up with dynamic, fulfilling careers in dog-washing: valets, luxury servants, touchy-feely insulators for the harried *prod*-folk. And their bosses.

But not all was manufacturing. Even dog-dressers needed Culture Prod. Especially dog-dressers.

"My sniffers are getting it," she said.

The Foe answered, *You're on the scent — but late.*

Something new...

She walked through the data-

vaults of the Culture City. As a glittering representation of unimaginable complexities, it loomed: Global, intricate, impossible to know fully for even a passing instant. And thus, an infinite resource.

She stamped through streets busy with commerce. Ferrets and deal-making programs scampered like rodents under heel. Towers of the giga-conglomerates raked the skies.

None of this Big Guy stuff for her. Not today, thanks.

To beat her Foe, she needed something born of Orange County, something to put on the table.

And only her own sniffer-programs could find it for her. The web of connections in even a single county was so criss-crossed that no mere human could find her way.

She snapped back into the real world. *Think.*

Lunch eased into her bloodstream, fed by the pod when it sensed her lowering blood sugar. Myung tapped for an extra Kaff to give her some zip. Her medical worrier hovered in air before her, clucked and frowned. She ignored it.

— And back to Culture City.

Glassy ramparts led up into the citadels of the mega-Corps. Showers of speculation rained on their flanks. Rivulets gurgled off into

gutters. Nothing new here, just the ceaseless hum of a market full of energy and no place to go.

Index check: sixteen hundred down!

The deals she had left running from the morning were pumping out the last of their dividends. No more help there.

Time's a-wastin', her Foe sent nastily. She could imagine his sneer and sardonic eyes.

Save your creds for the crunch, she retorted.

You're down thirteen hundred and falling.

He was right. The trouble with paired competition — the very latest market-stimulating twist — was that the outcome was starkly clear. No comforting self-delusions lasted long.

Irked, she leaped high and flew above the City. Go local, then. Orange County was the PacBasin's best fount of fresh ideas.

She caught vectors from the county drawing her down. Prickly hints sheeted across her belly, over her forearms. To the east — there — a shimmer of possibility.

Her ferrets were her own, of course — searcher programs tuned to her style, her way of perceiving quality and content. They were her, in a truncated sense.

Now they led her down a funnel, into —

A mall.

In real-space, no less. Tacky.

Hopelessly antique, of course. Dilapidated buildings leaning against each other, laid out in boring rectangular grids. Faded plastic and rusty chrome.

People still went there, of course; somewhere, she was sure, people still used wooden plows.

This must be in Kansas or the Siberian Free State or somewhere equally Out Of It. Why in the world had her sniffers taken her here?

She checked real-world location, preparing to lift out.

East Anaheim! Impossible...

But no — there was something here. Her sniffer popped up an overlay and the soles of her feet itched with anticipation. Programs zoomed her in on a gray shambles that dominated the end of the cracked blacktop parking lot.

Was this a museum? No, but —

Art Attack came the signifier.

That sign... "An old K-Mart," she murmured. She barely remembered being in one as a girl. Rigid, old-style aisles of plastic prod. Positively *cubic*, as the teenagers said. A cube, after all, was an infinite number of stacked squares.

But this K-Mart had been re-

shaped. Stucco-sculpted into an archly ironic lavender mosque, festooned with bright brand name items.

It hit her. "Of course!"

She zoomed up, above the Orange County jumble.

Here it was — pay dirt. And she was on the ground *first*.

She popped her pod and sucked in the dry, flavorful air. Back in Huntington Beach. Her throat was dry, the aftermath of tension.

And just 16:47, too. Plenty of time for a swim.

The team that had done the mock-mosque K-Mart were like all artists: sophisticated along one axis, dunderheads along all economic vectors. They had thought it was a pure lark to fashion ancient relics of paleo-capitalism into bizarre abstract expressionist "statements." Mere fun effusions, they thought.

She loved working with people who were, deep in their souls, innocent of markets.

Within two hours she had locked up the idea and labeled it: "Post-Consumerism Dada from the fabled Age of Appetite."

She had marketed it through pre-view around the globe. Thailand and the Siberians (the last true culture virgins) had gobbled up the

idea. Every rotting 'burb round the globe had plenty of derelict K-Marts; this gave them a new angle.

Then she had auctioned the idea in the Mesh. Cut in the artists for their majority interest. Sold shares. Franchised it in the Cutting Concept sub-Mesh. Divided shares twice, declared a dividend.

All in less time than it took to drive from Garden Grove to San Clemente.

"How'd you find that?" her Foe asked, climbing out of his pod.

"My sniffers are good, I told you."

He scowled. "And how'd you get there so fast?"

"You've got to take the larger view," she said mysteriously.

He grimaced. "You're up two thousand five creds."

"Lucky I didn't really trounce you."

"Culture City sure ate it up, too."

"Speaking of which, how about starting a steak? I'm starving."

He kissed her. This was perhaps the best part of the Foe-Team method. They spurred each other on, but didn't cut each other dead in the marketplace. No matter how appealing that seemed, sometimes.

Being married helped keep their rivalry on reasonable terms. Theirs

was a standard five-year monogamous contract, already nearly half over. But she already knew they would sign up again. How could she not renew, with such a deliciously stimulating opponent?

Sure, dog-eat-dog markets sometimes worked better, but who wanted to dine on dog?

"We'll split the chores," he said.

"We need a servant."

He laughed. "Think we're rich? We just grease the gears of the great machine."

"Such a poet you are."

"And there are still the dishes to do from last night."

"Ugh. I'll race you to the beach first."

Any scenario leaves out much, focusing on a microcosm. I made that explicit here by depicting a workaday world seen from where I live.

The county has a wide range of people. There is the largest group of Vietnamese immigrants in the U.S.A., quickly rising to the top of the elite. My class in physics for biology and pre-med students at UC Irvine is a sea of Asian faces; they comprise about half our student body, the largest percentage in the country.

And there are odd little towns,

like lovely Laguna Beach, the Orange of Tim Powers's novels, or Santa Ana, gang-ridden yet still atmospheric. Plenty of room for the inevitable boomers (a term dating from the Oklahoma land rush a century ago, meaning people who move in, riding expectations) and the high-tech zoomers of this scenario.

Thus in this vision, I used a Vietnamese viewpoint character, who sweeps over the landscape in a fashion now impossible, but swiftly approaching. I deliberately mixed real and computerized images here, to underline my suspicion that they will increasingly overlap in our perceptions of the world, as they become harder to distinguish from each other.

The young Myung is the sort of woman who would become a savvy, cut-to-the-chase account broker in the present. She will use technology only when it's efficient and

germane; she's no computer nerd. Indeed, the technology has faded into the background for her, as good tech always does.

So the notes of satire sounded in my scenario are deliberately general, despite using local place-names and details; we will always have economic ambition, hierarchies, losers and winners. It's in our species.

Science fiction focuses on how science and its descendant technologies affect us. It's important to remember that the eternal human themes — even of avarice and ambition — still play out against the changing techno-backdrop. Our machines get better, but we remain much the same.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: gbenford@uci.edu.



*Michael Swanwick is probably best known for his five novels, which include the Nebula Award-winning *Stations of the Tide* and his latest, *Jack Faust*. His short fiction has garnered such honors as a Sturgeon Award and a World Fantasy Award. When Tigereyes Press published his most recent collection, *A Geography of Unknown Lands*, in a small edition last year, we discovered this unusual tale lurking within and took it upon ourselves to bring it to you. We hope you'll agree it's a multifaceted gem.*

Mother Grasshopper

By Michael Swanwick

IN THE YEAR ONE, WE CAME in an armada of a million spacecraft to settle upon, colonize, and claim for our homeland this giant grasshopper on

which we now dwell.

We dared not land upon the wings for, though the cube-square rule held true and their most rapid motions would be imperceptible on an historic scale, random nerve firings resulted in pre-movement tremors measured at Richter 11. So we opted to build in the eyes, in the faceted mirrorlands that reflected infinities of flatness, a shimmering Iowa, the architecture of home.

It was an impossible project and one, perhaps, that was doomed from the start. But such things are obvious only in retrospect. We were a young and vigorous race then. Everything seemed possible.

Using shaped temporal fields, we force-grew trees which we cut down to build our cabins. We planted sod and wheat and buffalo. In one vivid and unforgettable night of technology we created a layer of limestone bedrock half a mile deep upon which to build our towns. And when our work was

done, we held hoe-downs in a thousand county seats all across the eye-lands.

We created new seasons, including Snow, after the patterns of those we had known in antiquity, but the night sky we left unaltered, for this was to be our home...now and forever. The unfamiliar constellations would grow their own legends over the ages; there would be time. Generations passed, and cities grew with whorls of suburbs like the arms of spiral galaxies around them, for we were lonely, as were the thousands and millions we decanted who grew like the trees of the cisocellar plains that were as thick as the ancient Black Forest.

I was a young man, newly bearded, hardly much more than a shirt-tail child, on that Harvest day when the stranger walked into town.

This was so unusual an event (and for you to whom a town of ten thousand necessarily means that there *will be strangers*, I despair of explaining) that children came out to shout and run at his heels, while we older citizens, conscious of our dignity, stood in the doorways of our shops, factories, and co-ops to gaze ponderously in his general direction. Not quite *at* him, you understand, but over his shoulder, into the flat, mesmeric plains and the infinite white skies beyond.

He claimed to have come all the way from the equatorial abdomen, where gravity is three times eye-normal, and this was easy enough to believe, for he was ungodly strong. With my own eyes I once saw him take a dollar coin between thumb and forefinger and bend it in half — and a steel dollar at that! He also claimed to have walked the entire distance, which nobody believed, not even me.

"If you'd walked even half that far," I said, "I reckon you'd be the most remarkable man as ever lived."

He laughed at that and ruffled my hair. "Well, maybe I am," he said. "Maybe I am."

I flushed and took a step backward, hand on the bandersnatch-skin hilt of my fighting knife. I was as feisty as a bantam rooster in those days, and twice as quick to take offense. "Mister, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to step outside."

The stranger looked at me. Then he reached out and, without the slightest hint of fear or anger or even regret, touched my arm just below the shoulder. He did it with no particular speed and yet somehow I could

not react fast enough to stop him. And that touch, light though it was, paralyzed my arm, leaving it withered and useless, even as it is today.

He put his drink down on the bar, and said, "Pick up my knapsack." I did.

"Follow me."

So it was that without a word of farewell to my family or even a backward glance, I left New Auschwitz forever.

That night, over a campfire of eel grass and dried buffalo chips, we ate a dinner of refried beans and fatback bacon. It was a new and clumsy experience for me, eating one-handed. For a long time, neither one of us spoke. Finally I said, "Are you a magician?"

The stranger sighed. "Maybe so," he said. "Maybe I am."

"You have a name?"

"No."

"What do we do now?"

"Business." He pushed his plate toward me. "I cooked. It's your turn to wash."

Our business entailed constant travel. We went to Brinkerton with cholera and to Roxborough with typhus. We passed through Denver and Venice and Saint Petersburg and left behind fleas, rats, and plague. In Upper Black Eddy, it was ebola. We never stayed long enough to see the results of our work, but I read the newspapers afterward, and it was about what you would expect.

Still, *on the whole*, humanity prospered. Where one city was decimated, another was expanding. The overspilling hospitals of one county created a market for the goods of a dozen others. The survivors had babies.

We walked to Tylersburg, Rutledge, and Uniontown and took wagons to Shoemakersville, Confluence, and South Gibson. Booked onto steam trains for Mount Lebanon, Mount Bethel, Mount Aetna, and Mount Nebo and diesel trains to McKeesport, Reinholds Station, and Broomall. Boarded buses to Carbondale, Feasterville, June Bug, and Lincoln Falls. Caught commuter flights to Paradise, Nickel Mines, Niantic, and Zion.

The time passed quickly.

Then one shocking day my magician announced that he was going home.

"Home?" I said. "What about your work?"

"Our work, Daniel," he said gently. "I expect you'll do as good a job as ever I did." He finished packing his few possessions into a carpetbag.

"You can't!" I cried.

With a wink and a sad smile, he slipped out the door.

FOR A TIME — long or short, I don't know — I sat motionless, unthinking, unseeing. Then I leaped to my feet, threw open the door, and looked up and down the empty street. Blocks away, toward the train station, was a scurrying black speck.

Leaving the door open behind me, I ran after it.

I just missed the afternoon express to Lackawanna. I asked the stationmaster when was the next train after it. He said tomorrow. Had he seen a tall man carrying a carpetbag, looking thus and so? Yes, he had. Where was he? On the train to Lackawanna. Nothing more heading that way today. Did he know where I could rent a car? Yes, he did. Place just down the road.

Maybe I'd've caught the magician if I hadn't gone back to the room to pick up my bags. Most likely not. At Lackawanna station I found he'd taken the bus to Johnstown. In Johnstown, he'd moved on to Erie and there the trail ran cold. It took me three days hard questioning to pick it up again.

For a week I pursued him thus, like a man possessed.

Then I awoke one morning and my panic was gone. I knew I wasn't going to catch my magician anytime soon. I took stock of my resources, counted up what little cash-money I had, and laid out a strategy. Then I went shopping. Finally, I hit the road. I'd have to be patient, dogged, wily, but I knew that, given enough time, I'd find him.

Find him, and kill him too.

The trail led me to Harper's Ferry, at the very edge of the oculus. Behind was civilization. Ahead was nothing but thousands of miles of empty chitin-lands.

People said he'd gone south, off the lens entirely.

Back at my boarding house, I was approached by one of the lodgers. He was a skinny man with a big mustache and sleeveless white T-shirt that

hung from his skinny shoulders like wet laundry on a muggy Sunday.

"What you got in that bag?"

"Black death," I said, "infectious meningitis, tuberculosis. You name it."

He thought for a bit. "I got this gal," he said at last. "I don't suppose you could..."

"I'll take a look at her," I said, and hoisted the bag.

We went upstairs to his room.

She lay in the bed, eyes closed. There was an IV needle in her arm, hooked up to a drip feed. She looked young, but of course that meant nothing. Her hair, neatly brushed and combed, laid across the coverlet almost to her waist, was white — white as snow, as death, as finest bone china.

"How long has she been like this?" I asked.

"Ohhhh..." He blew out his cheeks. "Forty-seven, maybe fifty years?"

"You her father?"

"Husband. Was, anyhow. Not sure how long the vows were meant to hold up under these conditions: can't say I've kept 'em any too well. You got something in that bag for her?" He said it as casual as he could, but his eyes were big and spooked-looking.

I made my decision. "Tell you what," I said. "I'll give you forty dollars for her."

"The sheriff wouldn't think much of what you just said," the man said low and quiet.

"No. But then, I suppose I'll be off of the eye-lands entirely before he knows a word of it."

I picked up my syringe.

"Well? Is it a deal or not?"

Her name was Victoria. We were a good three days march into the chitin before she came out of the trance state characteristic of the interim zombie stage of Recovery. I'd fitted her with a pack, walking shoes, and a good stout stick, and she strode along head up, eyes blank, speaking in the tongues of angels afloat between the stars.

" — cisgalactic phase intercept," she said. "Do you read? Das Uberraumboot zuruckgegenerinnernte. Verstehen? Anadaemonic

mesotechnological conflict strategizing. Drei tausenden Affen mit Laseren! Hello? Is anybody — ”

Then she stumbled over a rock, cried out in pain, and said, “Where am I?”

I stopped, spread a map on the ground, and got out my pocket gravitometer. It was a simple thing: a glass cylinder filled with aerogel and a bright orange ceramic bead. The casing was tin, with a compressor screw at the top, a calibrated scale along the side, and the words “Flynn & Co.” at the bottom. I flipped it over, watched the bead slowly fall. I tightened the screw a notch, then two, then three, increasing the aerogel’s density. At five, the bead stopped. I read the gauge, squinted up at the sun, and then jabbed a finger on an isobar to one edge of the map.

“Right here,” I said. “Just off the lens. See?”

“I don’t — ” She was trembling with panic. Her dilated eyes shifted wildly from one part of the empty horizon to another. Then suddenly, sourcelessly, she burst into tears.

Embarrassed, I looked away. When she was done crying, I patted the ground. “Sit.” Sniffling, she obeyed. “How old are you, Victoria?”

“How old am...? Sixteen?” she said tentatively. “Seventeen?” Then, “Is that really my name?”

“It was. The woman you were grew tired of life, and injected herself with a drug that destroys the ego and with it all trace of personal history.” I sighed. “So in one sense you’re still Victoria, and in another sense you’re not. What she did was illegal, though; you can never go back to the oculus. You’d be locked into jail for the rest of your life.”

She looked at me through eyes newly young, almost childlike in their experience, and still wet with tears. I was prepared for hysteria, grief, rage. But all she said was, “Are you a magician?”

That rocked me back on my heels. “Well — yes,” I said. “I suppose I am.”

She considered that silently for a moment. “So what happens to me now?”

“Your job is to carry that pack. We also go turn-on-turn with the dishes.” I straightened, folding the map. “Come on. We’ve got a far way yet to go.”

We commenced marching, in silence at first. But then, not many

miles down the road and to my complete astonishment, Victoria began to sing!

We followed the faintest of paths — less a trail than the memory of a dream of the idea of one — across the chitin. Alongside it grew an occasional patch of grass. A lot of wind-blown loess had swept across the chitin-lands over the centuries. It caught in cracks in the carapace and gave purchase to fortuitous seeds. Once I even saw a rabbit. But before I could point it out to Victoria, I saw something else. Up ahead, in a place where the shell had powdered and a rare rainstorm had turned the powder briefly to mud, were two overlapping tire prints. A motorbike had been by here, and recently.

I stared at the tracks for a long time, clenching and unclenching my good hand.

The very next day we came upon a settlement.

It was a hardscrabble place. Just a windmill to run the pump that brought up a trickle of ichor from a miles-deep well, a refinery to process the stuff edible, and a handful of unpainted clapboard buildings and Quonset huts. Several battered old pickup trucks sat rusting under the limitless sky.

A gaunt man stood by the gate, waiting for us. His jaw was hard, his backbone straight and his hands empty. But I noted here and there a shiver of movement in a window or from the open door of a shed, and I made no mistake but that there were weapons trained upon us.

"Name's Rivera," the man said when we came up to him.

I swept off my bowler hat. "Daniel. This's Miss Victoria, my ward."

"Passing through?"

"Yessir, I am, and I see no reason I should ever pass this way again. If you have food for sale, I'll pay you market rates. But if not, why, with your permission, we'll just keep on moving on."

"Fair spoken." From somewhere Rivera produced a cup of water, and handed it to us. I drank half, handed the rest to Victoria. She shivered as it went down.

"Right good," I said. "And cold too."

"We have a heat pump," Rivera said with grudging pride. "C'mon inside. Let's see what the women have made us to eat."

Then the children came running out, whooping and hollering, too many to count, and the adult people behind them, whom I made out to be twenty in number. They made us welcome.

They were good people, if outlaws, and as hungry for news and gossip as anybody can be. I told them about a stump speech I had heard made by Tyler B. Morris, who was running for governor of the Northern Department, and they spent all of dinnertime discussing it. The food was good, too — ham and biscuits with red-eye gravy, sweet yams with butter, and apple cobbler to boot. If I hadn't seen their chemical complex, I'd've never guessed it for synthetic. There were lace curtains in the window, brittle-old but clean, and I noted how carefully the leftovers were stored away for later.

After we'd eaten, Rivera caught my eye and gestured with his chin. We went outside, and he led me to a shed out back. He unpadlocked the door and we stepped within. A line of ten people lay unmoving on plain-built beds. They were each catheterized to a drip-bag of processed ichor. Light from the door caught their hair, ten white haloes in the gloom.

"We brought them with us," Rivera said. "Thought we'd be doing well enough to make a go of it. Lately, though, I don't know, maybe it's the drought, but the blood's been running thin, and it's not like we have the money to have a new well drilled."

"I understand." Then, because it seemed a good time to ask, "There was a man came by this way probably less'n a week ago. Tall, riding a — "

"He wouldn't help," Harry said. "Said it wasn't his responsibility. Then, before he drove off, the sonofabitch tried to buy some of our food." He turned and spat. "He told us you and the woman would be coming along. We been waiting."

"Wait. He told you I'd have a woman with me?"

"It's not just us we have to think of!" he said with sudden vehemence. "There's the young fellers, too. They come along and all a man's stiff-necked talk about obligations and morality goes right out the window. Sometimes I think how I could come out here with a length of iron pipe and — well." He shook his head and then, almost pleadingly, said, "Can't you do something?"

"I think so." A faint creaking noise made me turn then. Victoria stood frozen in the doorway. The light through her hair made of it a white flare.

I closed my eyes, wishing she hadn't stumbled across this thing. In a neutral voice I said, "Get my bag."

Then Rivera and I set to haggling out a price.

WE LEFT the settlement with a goodly store of food and driving their third-best pickup truck. It was a pathetic old thing and the shocks were scarce more than a memory. We bumped and jolted toward the south.

For a long time Victoria did not speak. Then she turned to me and angrily blurted, "You *killed* them!"

"It was what they wanted."

"How can you say that?" She twisted in the seat and punched me in the shoulder. Hard. "How can you sit there and...say that?"

"Look," I said testily. "It's simple mathematics. You could make an equation out of it. They can only drill so much ichor. That ichor makes only so much food. Divide that by the number of mouths there are to feed and hold up the result against what it takes to keep one alive. So much food, so many people. If the one's smaller than the other, you starve. And the children wanted to live. The folks in the shed didn't."

"They could go back! Nobody *has* to live out in the middle of nowhere trying to scratch food out of nothing!"

"I counted one suicide for every two waking adults. Just how welcome do you think they'd be, back to the oculus, with so many suicides living among them? More than likely that's what drove them out here in the first place."

"Well...nobody would be starving if they didn't insist on having so many damn children."

"How can you stop people from having children?" I asked.

There was no possible answer to that and we both knew it. Victoria leaned her head against the cab window, eyes squeezed tight shut, as far from me as she could get. "You could have woken them up! But no, you had your bag of goodies and you wanted to play. I'm surprised you didn't kill me when you had the chance."

"Vickie..."

"Don't speak to me!"

She started to weep.

I wanted to hug her and comfort her, she was so miserable. But I was driving, and I only had the one good arm. So I didn't. Nor did I explain to her why it was that nobody chose to simply wake the suicides up.

That evening, as usual, I got out the hatchet and splintered enough chitin for a campfire. I was sitting by it; silent, when Victoria got out the jug of rough liquor the settlement folks had brewed from ichor. "You be careful with that stuff," I said. "It sneaks up on you. Don't forget, whatever experience you've had drinking got left behind in your first life."

"Then you drink!" she said, thrusting a cup at me. "I'll follow your lead. When you stop, I'll stop."

I swear I never suspected what she had in mind. And it had been a long while since I'd tasted alcohol. So, like a fool, I took her intent at face value. I had a drink. And then another.

Time passed.

We talked some, we laughed some. Maybe we sang a song or two.

Then, somehow, Victoria had shucked off her blouse and was dancing. She whirled around the campfire, her long skirts lifting up above her knees and occasionally flirting through the flames so that the hem browned and smoked but never quite caught fire.

This wildness seemed to come out of nowhere. I watched her, alarmed and aroused, too drunk to think clearly, too entranced even to move.

Finally she collapsed gracefully at my feet. The firelight was red on her naked back, shifting with each gasping breath she took. She looked up at me through her long, sweat-tangled hair, and her eyes were like amber, dark as cypress swamp water, brown and bottomless. Eyes a man could drown in.

I pulled her toward me. Laughing, she surged forward, collapsing upon me, tumbling me over backward, fumbling with my belt and then the fly of my jeans. Then she had my cock out and stiff and I'd pushed her skirt up above her waist so that it seemed she was wearing nothing but a thick red sash. And I rolled her over on her back and she was reaching down between her legs to guide me in and she was smiling and lovely.

I plunged deep, deep, deep into her, and oh god but it felt fine. Like that eye-opening shock you get when you plunge into a cold lake for the first time on a hot summer's day and the water wraps itself around you and

feels so impossibly good. Only this was warm and slippery-slick and a thousand times better. Then I was telling her things, telling her I needed her, I wanted her, I loved her, over and over again.

I awoke the next morning with a raging hangover. Victoria was sitting in the cab of the pickup, brushing her long white hair in the rear-view mirror and humming to herself.

"Well," she said, amused. "Look what the cat dragged in. There's water in the jerrycans. Have yourself a drink. I expect we could also spare a cup for you to wash your face with."

"Look," I said. "I'm sorry about last night."

"No you're not."

"I maybe said some foolish things, but — "

Her eyes flashed storm-cloud dark. "You weren't speaking near so foolish then as you are now. You meant every damn word, and I'm holding you to them." Then she laughed. "You'd best get at that water. You look hideous."

So I dragged myself off.

Overnight, Victoria had changed. Her whole manner, the way she held herself, even the way she phrased her words, told me that she wasn't a child anymore. She was a woman.

The thing I'd been dreading had begun.

"Resistance is useless," Victoria read. "For mine is the might and power of the Cosmos Itself!" She'd found a comic book stuck back under the seat and gone through it three times, chuckling to herself, while the truck rattled down that near-nonexistent road. Now she put it down. "Tell me something," she said. "How do you know your magician came by this way?"

"I just know is all," I said curtly. I'd given myself a shot of B-complex vitamins, but my head and gut still felt pretty ragged. Nor was it particularly soothing having to drive this idiot truck one-armed. And, anyway, I couldn't say just how I knew. It was a feeling I had, a certainty.

"I had a dream last night. After we, ummmmm, danced."

I didn't look at her.

"I was on a flat platform, like a railroad station, only enormous. It

stretched halfway to infinity. There were stars all around me, thicker and more colorful than I'd ever imagined them. Bright enough to make your eyes ache. Enormous machines were everywhere, golden, spaceships I suppose. They were taking off and landing with delicate little puffs of air, like it was the easiest thing imaginable to do. My body was so light I felt like I was going to float up among them. You ever hear of a place like that?"

"No."

"There was a man waiting for me there. He had the saddest smile, but cold, cruel eyes. Hello, Victoria, he said, and How did you know my name, I asked. Oh, I keep a close eye on Daniel, he said, I'm grooming him for an important job. Then he showed me a syringe. Do you know what's in here? he asked me. The liquid in it was so blue it shone." She fell silent.

"What did you say?"

"I just shook my head. Mortality, he said. It's an improved version of the drug you shot yourself up with fifty years ago. Tell Daniel it'll be waiting for him at Sky Terminus, where the great ships come and go. That was all. You think it means anything?"

I shook my head.

She picked up the comic book, flipped it open again. "Well, anyway, it was a strange dream."

That night, after doing the dishes, I went and sat down on the pickup's sideboard and stared into the fire, thinking. Victoria came and sat down beside me. She put a hand on my leg. It was the lightest of touches, but it sent all my blood rushing to my cock.

She smiled at that and looked up into my eyes. "Resistance is useless," she said.

Afterward we lay together between blankets on the ground, looking up at the night sky. It came to me then that being taken away from normal life young as I had been, all my experience with love had come before the event and all my experience with sex after, and that I'd therefore never before known them both together. So that in this situation I was as naive and unprepared for what was happening to us as Victoria was.

Which was how I admitted to myself I loved Victoria. At the time it seemed the worst possible thing that could've happened to me.

We saw it for the first time that next afternoon. It began as a giddy feeling, like a mild case of vertigo, and a vague thickening at the center of the sky as if it were going dark from the inside out. This was accompanied by a bulging up of the horizon, as if God Himself had placed hands flat on either edge and leaned forward, bowing it upward.

Then my inner ear knew that the land which had been flat as flat for all these many miles was now slanting downhill all the way to the horizon. That was the gravitational influence of all that mass before us. Late into the day it just appeared. It was like a conjuring trick. One moment it wasn't there at all and then, with the slightest of perceptual shifts, it dominated the vision. It was so distant that it took on the milky backscatter color of the sky and it went up so high you literally couldn't see the top. It was — I knew this now — our destination:

The antenna.

Even driving the pickup truck, it took three days after first sighting to reach its base.

On the morning of one of those days, Victoria suddenly pushed aside her breakfast and ran for the far side of the truck. That being the only privacy to be had for hundreds of miles around.

I listened to her retching. Knowing there was only one thing it could be.

She came back, pale and shaken. I got a plastic collection cup out of my bag. "Pee into this," I told her. When she had, I ran a quick diagnostic. It came up positive.

"Victoria," I said. "I've got an admission to make. I haven't been exactly straight with you about the medical consequences of your...condition."

It was the only time I ever saw her afraid. "My God," she said, "What is it? Tell me! What's happening to me?"

"Well, to begin with, you're pregnant."

There were no roads to the terminus, for all that it was visible from miles off. It lay nestled at the base of the antenna, and to look at the empty and trackless plains about it, you'd think there was neither reason for its existence nor possibility of any significant traffic there.

Yet the closer we got, the more people we saw approaching it. They

appeared out of the everywhere and nothingness like hydrogen atoms being pulled into existence in the stressed spaces between galaxies, or like shards of ice crystallizing at random in supercooled superpure water. You'd see one far to your left, maybe strolling along with a walking stick slung casually over one shoulder and a gait that just told you she was whistling. Then beyond her in the distance a puff of dust from what could only be a half-track. And to the right, a man in a wide-brimmed hat sitting ramrod-straight in the saddle of a native parasite larger than any elephant. With every hour a different configuration, and all converging.

Roads materialized underfoot. By the time we arrived at the terminus, they were thronged with people.

The terminal building itself was as large as a city, all gleaming white marble arches and colonnades and parapets and towers. Pennants snapped in the wind. Welcoming musicians played at the feet of the columns. An enormous holographic banner dopplering slowly through the rainbow from infrared to ultraviolet and back again, read:

BYZANTIUM PORT AUTHORITY
MAGNETIC-LEVITATION MASS TRANSIT DIVISION
GROUND TERMINUS

Somebody later told me it provided employment for a hundred thousand people, and I believed him.

Victoria and I parked the truck by the front steps. I opened the door for her and helped her gingerly out. Her belly was enormous by then, and her sense of balance was off. We started up the steps. Behind us, a uniformed lackey got in the pickup and drove it away.

The space within was grander than could have been supported had the terminus not been located at the cusp of antenna and forehead, where the proximate masses each canceled out much of the other's attraction. There were countless ticket windows, all of carved mahogany. I settled Victoria down on a bench — her feet were tender — and went to stand in line. When I got to the front, the ticket-taker glanced at a computer screen and said, "May I help you, sir?"

"Two tickets, first-class. Up."

He tapped at the keyboard and a little device spat out two crisp

pasteboard tickets. He slid them across the polished brass counter, and I reached for my wallet. "How much?" I said.

He glanced at his computer and shook his head. "No charge for you, Mister Daniel. Professional courtesy."

"How did you know my name?"

"You're expected." Then, before I could ask any more questions, "That's all I can tell you, sir. I can neither speak nor understand your language. It is impossible for me to converse with you."

"Then what the hell," I said testily, "are we doing now?"

He flipped the screen around for me to see. On it was a verbatim transcript of our conversation. The last line was: I SIMPLY READ WHAT'S ON THE SCREEN, SIR.

Then he turned it back toward himself and said, "I simply read what's — "

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I said. And went back to Victoria.

EVEN AT mag-lev speeds, it took two days to travel the full length of the antenna. To amuse myself, I periodically took out my gravimeter and made readings. You'd think the figures would diminish exponentially as we climbed out of the gravity well. But because the antennae swept backward, over the bulk of the grasshopper, rather than forward and away, the gravitational gradient of our journey was quite complex. It lessened rapidly at first, grew temporarily stronger, and then lessened again, in the complex and lovely flattening sine-wave known as a Sheffield curve. You could see it reflected in the size of the magnetic rings we flashed through, three per minute, how they grew skinnier then fatter and finally skinnier still as we flew upward.

On the second day, Victoria gave birth. It was a beautiful child, a boy. I wanted to name him Hector, after my father, but Victoria was set on Jonathan, and as usual I gave in to her.

Afterward, though, I studied her features. There were crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes, or maybe "laugh lines" was more appropriate, given Victoria's personality. The lines to either side of her mouth had deepened. Her whole face had a haggard cast to it. Looking at her, I felt a sadness so large and pervasive it seemed to fill the universe.

She was aging along her own exponential curve. The process was accelerating now, and I was not at all certain she would make it to Sky Terminus. It would be a close thing in either case.

I could see that Victoria knew it too. But she was happy as she hugged our child. "It's been a good life," she said. "I wish you could have grown with me — don't pout, you're so solemn, Daniel! — but other than that I have no complaints."

I looked out the window for a minute. I had known her for only — what? — a week, maybe. But in that brief time she had picked me up, shaken me off, and turned my life around. She had changed everything. When I looked back, I was crying.

"Death is the price we pay for children, isn't it?" she said. "Down below, they've made death illegal. But they're only fooling themselves. They think it's possible to live forever. They think there are no limits to growth. But everything dies — people, stars, the universe. And once it's over, all lives are the same length."

"I guess I'm just not so philosophical as you. It's a damned hard thing to lose your wife."

"Well, at least you figured that one out."

"What one?

"That I'm your wife." She was silent a moment. Then she said, "I had another dream. About your magician. And he explained about the drug. The one he called mortality."

"Huh," I said. Not really caring.

"The drug I took, you wake up and you burn through your life in a matter of days. With the new version, you wake up with a normal human lifespan, the length people had before the immortality treatments. One hundred fifty, two hundred years — that's not so immediate. The suicides are kept alive because their deaths come on so soon; it's too shocking to the survivors' sensibilities. The new version shows its effects too slowly to be stopped."

I stroked her long white hair. So fine. So very, very brittle. "Let's not talk about any of this."

Her eyes blazed "Let's do! Don't pretend to be a fool, Daniel. People multiply. There's only so much food, water, space. If nobody dies, there'll come a time when everybody dies." Then she smiled again, fondly, the

way you might at a petulant but still promising child. "You know what's required of you, Daniel. And I'm proud of you for being worthy of it."

Sky Terminus was enormous, dazzling, beyond description. It was exactly like in Vickie's dream. I helped her out onto the platform. She could barely stand by then, but her eyes were bright and curious. Jonathan was asleep against my chest in a baby-sling.

Whatever held the atmosphere to the platform, it offered no resistance to the glittering, brilliantly articulated ships that rose and descended from all parts. Strange cargoes were unloaded by even stranger longshoremen.

"I'm not as excited by all this as I would've been when I was younger," Victoria murmured. "But somehow I find it more satisfying. Does that make sense to you?"

I began to say something. But then, abruptly, the light went out of her eyes. Stiffening, she stared straight ahead of herself into nothing that I could see. There was no emotion in her face whatsoever.

"Vickie?" I said.

Slowly, she tumbled to the ground.

It was then, while I stood stunned and unbelieving, that the magician came walking up to me.

In my imagination I'd run through this scene a thousand times: Leaving my bag behind, I stumbled off the train, toward him. He made no move to escape. I flipped open my jacket with a shrug of the shoulder, drew out the revolver with my good hand, and fired.

Now, though...

He looked sadly down at Victoria's body and put an arm around my shoulders.

"God," he said, "don't they just break your heart?"

I stayed on a month at the Sky Terminus to watch my son grow up. Jonathan died without offspring and was given an orbital burial. His coffin circled the grasshopper seven times before the orbit decayed and it scratched a bright meteoric line down into the night. The flare lasted about as long as would a struck sulfur match.

He'd been a good man, with a wicked sense of humor that never came from my side of the family.

So now I wander the world. Civilizations rise and fall about me. Only I remain unchanged. Where things haven't gotten too bad, I scatter mortality. Where they have I unleash disease.

I go where I go and I do my job. The generations rise up like wheat before me, and like a harvester I mow them down. Sometimes—not often—I go off by myself, to think and remember. Then I stare up into the night, into the colonized universe, until the tears rise up in my sight and drown the swarming stars.

I am Death and this is my story. ☠

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

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STUTE READERS of this magazine have probably noticed some new writers have been joining more familiar contributors over the past months. We hope you like this trend, particularly since next month's cover story comes from a writer whose name is not as well-known as it ought to be. Mark Geston published his first novel, *Lords of the Starship*, while still in college in 1967, and went on to publish *Out of the Mouth of the Dragon*, *The Day Star*, and *The Siege of Wonder* before his career as a lawyer drew him away from the SF field.

Fortunately, he has found more time for fiction during the 1990s, including a recent novel entitled *Mirror to the Sky*, and now he has written a dynamite novella for us entitled "The Allies." This tale of Earth's future is unlike anything we've seen in some time. We think you're going to like it.

A more familiar name to most readers is Bruce Sterling, whose story "Maneki Neko" will appear here next month. Actually, the tale was published once already, but our knowledge of Japanese wasn't good enough to make sense of the version published in *Hayakawa SF* last year. The story makes lots of sense in English—perhaps too much sense nowadays.

And here are some more familiar names: Mike Resnick, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Terry Bisson, Jack McDevitt, Kit Reed, Ron Goulart. You can look forward to new stories from them all in the months to come, as well as lots of others. We can neither confirm nor deny the rumor that the Nairobi Trio will be appearing shortly, but we do feel certain you'll like what's to come in the next few months.



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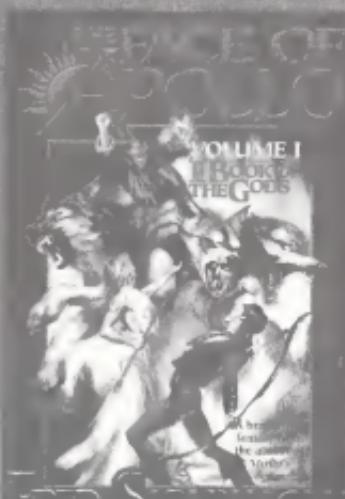
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